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The purpose of this study was to explore how consumers use clothing to identify with fashion consumer groups and the role of brands in this process. To address this purpose, I examined the consumption behaviors of fashion leaders within the clothing swap environment. An emerging consumption phenomenon, clothing swaps involve the exchange of clothing items between two consumers to acquire “new-to-them” clothing without spending money. An increasingly popular means of acquiring clothing, swaps occur both in person at swap parties and online through swap websites. Although swaps have become popular among consumers, very little academic research exists on swaps as a particular consumption environment. Thus, this study addresses a major gap that exists within the consumer behavior literature.

An ethnographic approach to research was used to address the purpose of the study. Specifically, consumption behaviors of fashion leaders were investigated relative to the clothing swap. Three methods of data collection were employed, including participant observation, in-depth interviews, and netnographic observation. A total of five in-person swap parties were observed. Interviews were conducted with sixteen females aged 19 to 37. In addition, five clothing swap websites were observed over a one month period. Data were analyzed for similarities and differences which were then used in the development of the thematic interpretation.

Three conceptual areas surfaced and are used to structure the interpretation: *The Fashion Leadership Experience*, *Fashion Leaders and Group Membership*, and *The*

Clothing Exchange Experience. Within each area, themes that emerged through the analysis of data are interpreted and issues important to each theme are addressed. The broader relevance of the interpretation was then considered in relation to the existing literature on the topic.

Findings indicate that fashion leadership reflects individual needs for uniqueness as well as group identification. Brands were not found to be a motivation for apparel consumption among fashion leaders, however, they are important to the expression of fashion leadership. Findings also shed light on the role of swapping in facilitating fashion leadership and the extent to which clothing swaps broaden traditional concepts of exchange and the consumption cycle. Although this study addresses major gaps in the literature, it also points to the need for further inquiry into fashion consumer group membership, brands, and consumer behavior within the clothing swap environment.

SWAPPING STYLES: AN EXPLORATION OF FASHION LEADERSHIP,
BRANDS, AND GROUP MEMBERSHIP IN THE
CONTEXT OF CLOTHING SWAPS

by

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To my inspiration for embarking on this academic journey, my mother Dr. Mabel Jones Matthews. It was about 20 years ago when I remember you working diligently on your dissertation. As a lively 11 year old, I did not understand your late night writing sessions and the hours upon hours you spent in the library. Now that I have come to this pivotal point in my Ph.D. process, I have a clear understanding of what you endured in order to be called “Dr. Matthews.” I have learned so much from my personal experience working towards this goal, and I thank you for your early example of perseverance. I thank you for your love, prayers, and encouragement throughout this process, as I know I would not have made it this far without your support. As I approach my journey into academia, I only hope to serve with the same dedication, sincerity, and passion as you had during your tenure. I feel so honored to follow in your footsteps. Make way for another “Dr. Matthews.” Second, I also dedicate this dissertation to my father Delmar Ray Matthews.

Although you are not here physically to see me complete this task, I know you are beaming down on me from above. I thank you for always believing in me and instilling in me that I could achieve anything I set my mind to.

APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

When considering a product or service, today's consumers are faced with many choices. As the marketplace becomes more and more competitive, new product, service, and channel options make the decision-making process more complex. One factor, however, that helps consumers to make a decision is brand name. Brand names help consumers identify the source of a product, and signal specific attributes and key benefits of the product (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1998; Kotler & Keller, 2009).

Historically, there is evidence of branding as far back as ancient times in the form of bricks etched with the name of the craftsmen who made them (Aaker, 1991). In the early 16th century, whiskey distillers burned the name of their brand onto wooden shipping crates to ensure identification of their product (Aaker, 1991). Procter & Gamble continued this branding tradition in the late 1800's with their well-known soap brand Ivory. "Ivory" represented the pure and mild nature of the soap, and aided in differentiating the brand from its competitors (Kornberger, 2010). These early examples of branding suggest that a brand signals certain qualities to the consumer beyond just a product's attributes. When these qualities help to form a positive impression, consumers are more likely to choose the brand as compared to other options (Keller, 1993). Moreover, as a consumer chooses the brand repeatedly, commitment to the brand evolves into a brand relationship (Oliver, 1999).

Past research has shown that certain groups of consumers have stronger motivations towards some brands over others (Liu & Wang, 2008). For instance, fashion leadership groups have a high need for uniqueness that motivates them to choose more novel offerings within the apparel product category (Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001; Workman & Kidd, 2000). For these groups of consumers, certain brands may signify specific meanings important to group identity and membership.

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the role that brands play in group identity and membership among fashion consumer groups and specifically fashion leaders. The guiding question of the research is: *How do consumers use clothing to identify with specific fashion consumer groups, and what role does brand play in this process?* Fashion leaders are the focus of this study, as past research has shown that this group of consumers exhibit a strong interest in fashion and frequently buy new apparel (Goldsmith & Clark, 2008; Phau & Lo, 2004; Workman & Caldwell, 2007). Because of their interest in fashion, it is likely that members of these groups may exhibit strong associations with certain apparel brands. To better understand fashion consumer group behavior, and specifically fashion leadership, relative to brands, the clothing swap provided a context for data collection.

A clothing swap party is an exchange of clothing items between two consumers without the use of money (Straaten, 2010). Clothing swaps occur in person as well as online through swap websites. At an in-person swap, consumers gather at a host's home and bring with them any gently used and/or never worn clothing that they no longer desire. Once all garments are gathered, the items are then valued based on key

categories, ranging from inexpensive to expensive (Straaten 2010). Based upon their allocations, party-goers can choose items to swap. In addition, party-goers frequently discuss what is chosen and why – as items are selected on a one-by-one basis (Straaten, 2010).

The same process is followed online, with two swappers choosing to exchange their items based on their respective online posts about the items. These posts include photos as well as descriptions of the items. Most of the popular clothing swap sites also include blogging and social networking, where swappers engage in conversations about fashion and brands. Examining online swap sites alongside in-person swaps is therefore important, in that fashion leaders are often in a position to persuade others to consider new fashions (Workman & Caldwell, 2007), and typically use the Internet environment to do so.

Background

Fashion Consumer Groups

Fashion consumer groups is a topic of frequent research (Bertrandias & Goldsmith, 2006; Phau & Lo, 2004; Workman & Studak, 2007). This topic is popular because it has implications for how retailers and designers might target specific consumers. If the motivations and behaviors of fashion consumer groups are understood, then needs and wants can be predicted and better satisfied.

The concept of fashion consumer groups was first discussed in Everett M. Rogers' (1962) seminal work *Diffusion of Innovations*. According to Rogers (1962), consumers have distinct adoption patterns when presented with new product options.

Specifically, there are five basic consumer adoption categories that follow a bell-shaped curve: *innovators* (2.5% of population), *early adopters* (12.5% of population), *early majority* (34% of population), *late majority* (34% of population), and *laggards* (16% of population). The curve can help marketers predict when certain groups will adopt new products. Moreover, the sooner a product is adopted, the faster it will move towards acceptance among a greater percentage of individuals (Rogers, 1962).

Building upon Roger's model, Hirschman and Adcock (1978) developed a scale to differentiate between fashion consumer groups. The scale identifies four fashion-oriented consumer groups, including *fashion opinion leaders*, *fashion innovators*, *fashion followers*, and *innovative communicators* (Hirschman & Adcock, 1978). These four groups have distinctive characteristics with regard to how they interact with apparel and fashion trends. Consequently, each group behaves differently based on their primary motivations for apparel decision-making. The diverse behaviors that fashion consumer groups exhibit has been assessed by many researchers. Table 1 illustrates the behavioral characteristics of each group and is adapted from several studies that have examined the behaviors of all four fashion consumer groups (Kang & Park-Poaps, 2010; Workman & Kidd, 2000; Workman & Caldwell, 2007).

Table 1

Behavioral Characteristics of Four Fashion Consumer Groups

| | Fashion Opinion Leaders | Fashion Innovators | Fashion Followers | Innovative Communicators |
|--|-------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|
| Have a great need for uniqueness regarding apparel choices | * | * | x | x |
| Have a strong interest in fashion | * | * | x | x |
| Driven by hedonic motivations | x | * | x | x |
| Driven by utilitarian motivations | * | x | * | x |
| Practice more appearance management behaviors; more conscious of their bodies | * | x | x | x |
| Read fashion magazines, buy new fashions, and shop for apparel at a highly frequent rate | * | * | x | x |
| Adopt fashion trends at a slower rate | x | x | * | x |
| Less subject to boredom due to mental stimulation | x | x | x | * |

Note. * = Characteristic exhibited; x = Characteristic not exhibited. Adapted from: Kang, J. & Park-Poaps, H. (2010). Hedonic and utilitarian shopping motivations of fashion leadership. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, 14(2), 312 – 328.
 Workman, J. & Kidd, L. (2000). Use of the need for uniqueness scale to characterize fashion consumer groups. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 18 (4), 227 – 236.
 Workman, J. & Caldwell, L. (2007). Centrality of visual product aesthetics, tactile, and uniqueness needs of fashion consumers. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 31 (6), 589 – 596.

As shown in Table 1, fashion opinion leaders and fashion innovators are the most fashion conscious of the four consumer groups, as they have a strong interest in fashion and

consistently follow fashion trends. In addition, they are driven by a high need for uniqueness when making their apparel choices (Snyder & Fromkin, 1977; Tian et al., 2001; Workman & Kidd, 2000; Workman & Cho, 2012). In contrast, fashion followers and innovative communicators do not shop for apparel at a frequent rate and are not driven by hedonic shopping motivations (Workman & Caldwell, 2007).

Taking into consideration these fundamental characteristics, it is evident that fashion innovators and opinion leaders are the most appropriate groups to examine to further understand the connections they form with apparel, and how they use apparel to express themselves. As fashion leaders, given their keen knowledge of the fashion industry, they will likely be aware of diverse apparel brands and the benefits that each of these brands offer. The next section outlines the concept of brand and brand equity, and discusses how brand meaning is established within groups.

Brands

A brand is defined as a distinguishing “name, term, sign, symbol, or design, which is intended to identify goods or services of either one seller or a group of sellers” (Keller, 1993, p. 2). This name, or symbol, allows the brand to differentiate itself from the goods/services of competitors, and indicates to consumers a certain level of worth. Thus, a brand “signals to the customer the source of the product, and protects both the customer and the producer from competitors who would attempt to provide products that appear to be identical” (Aaker, 1991, p. 7).

Consumers judge brands on a cognitive and emotional basis, thus brand perceptions are created by consumers (Keller, 2001). Knight and Kim (2007) suggest

that brand perceptions of emotional value increase purchase intention, and that retailers who implement strategies that promote emotional connections with their apparel brands create value in the minds of consumers. Likewise, Schau, Muniz, and Arnould (2009) discovered twelve key practices that consumers use within specific brand communities to assign unique value to their favorite brands. For instance, brand advocates of Mini Cooper cars engage in the practice of “milestoning,” where individuals in the Mini Cooper brand community create scrapbooks to document the production “journey” of their Mini Cooper cars (Schau et al., 2009). The emotional value of the brand is further displayed when community members share the scrapbooks, as well as the “birthing” stories of their new Mini Coopers, with each other.

There are many factors that make a brand notable and facilitate a favorable perception of it among consumers. Most often, tangible aspects of the product, such as product attributes, innovative features, and packaging are what make a brand popular with consumers (Franzen & Moriarty, 2009). However, the most pivotal aspect of a brand is often one that is intangible: brand equity. Brand equity is defined as “the value attached to a functional product or service by associating it with the brand name” (Aaker & Biel, 1993, p. 17). Moreover, brand equity can be further explained as capitalizing on the value of the brand name (Marconi, 2000). According to Marconi (2000), when a brand is able to create strong equity, consumers tend to remain loyal to the brand and are less likely to switch to another brand. As a brand becomes more highly regarded, consumers are less sensitive to price increases in the marketplace — which in turn allows the brand to achieve higher profit margins (Villas-Boas, 2004).

Creating brand equity is not a simple task. However, having strong brand equity can be the basis of a competitive advantage for a product (Villas-Boas, 2004). As a result, it is imperative that a brand focuses on creating this added-value. Aaker (1991) defines five categories of assets that are the basis of brand equity: *brand loyalty*, *brand awareness*, *perceived quality*, *brand associations*, and *other proprietary brand assets*. According to Aaker (1991), brand loyalty refers to a consumer repeatedly purchasing a product, while brand awareness encompasses a consumer being able to accurately identify a particular brand. Perceived quality entails the overall quality observation a consumer has of a product. Perceived quality oftentimes leads to brand associations – which are the actual emotions consumers relate with certain brands. Lastly, other proprietary brand assets involve the patents, trademarks, and channel relationships a brand embodies. Figure 1 further illustrates how each of the five assets of brand equity is defined by Aaker.

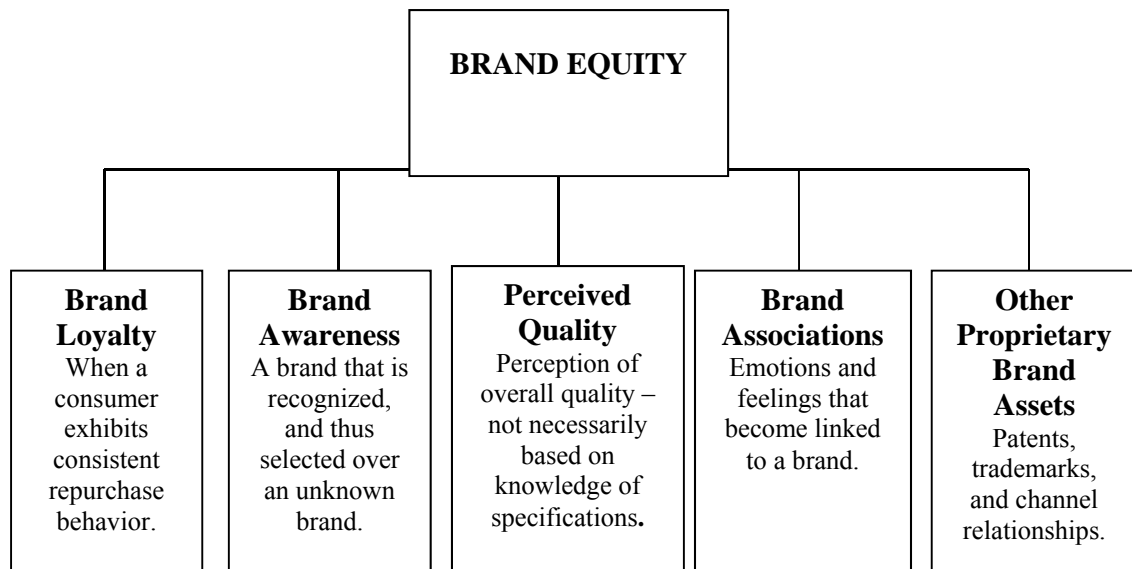


Figure 1. Five Assets of Brand Equity

Adapted from: Aaker, D. A. (1991). *Managing brand equity: Capitalizing on the value of a brand name*. New York, NY: The Free Press.

Of Aaker's five assets of brand equity, the asset most commonly linked to the topic of brand meaning is brand association. Oftentimes, an abstract or symbolic meaning can be attached to a particular brand. This attachment occurs because every time a consumer has contact with a brand (through actual use or advertisement), an association with the brand forms in the consumer's memory (Franzen & Moriarty, 2009). Over time, meaning is derived from the consumer's own personal perspective of the brand. Once this meaning is consciously understood, the consumer will be more likely to advocate for the brand, as a sense of a "natural fit" of the brand with their personal identity now exists (Oliver, 1999). Although several studies have sought to understand how individuals perceive brands (Aagerup, 2011; Herstein & Tifferet, 2010; Kim & Kwon, 2011), a smaller number of studies have focused specifically on how fashion

consumer groups may identify with specific brands (Lee & Kim, 2008; Workman & Cho, 2012). The brand relationship concept can be explored through the notion of identification, as the concept explains how individuals associate themselves with specific social groups to further foster their sense of belonging (Badrinarayanan & Laverie, 2011). The next section defines identification and examines how this concept can be useful for understanding brands relative to fashion consumer groups.

Identification

Identification occurs when a person develops an attitude to conform to a group's expectations (Solomon, 2009). Being categorized as part of a certain group promotes the image of self that an individual desires to portray (Schau et al., 2009). Thus, individuals purposely seek out membership in groups that are distinctive to promote their self-evaluations (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). Brand can be linked to fashion consumer groups through this concept of identification, as individuals may choose particular apparel brands to further establish their membership within a fashion consumer group. Thus, a preference for particular apparel brands may be expected in order for them to maintain membership within that group. However, before the notion of identification can be fully discussed, the concept of social identity and Social Identity Theory must be understood, as both have bearing on the concept of identification.

Social identity entails an individual's self-concept based on their membership in a particular group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory (1979) extends this notion of social identity by positing that individuals categorize themselves in certain social groups to define their membership within society at large.

Specifically, the theory involves four components – *social identity*, *social categorization*, *social comparison*, and *group distinctiveness* (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This theory highlights the process of how individuals order their social environment into different groups (*social categorization*), enhance their self-concept by gaining membership in a social group (*social identity*), compare themselves to others based upon their group affiliations (*social comparison*), and then differentiate their group from other groups based upon their unique group characteristics and norms (*group distinctiveness*). According to Social Identity Theory, as individuals establish membership in a group a sense of identification leads to behaviors that, in turn, serve to reinforce the group's interests.

Social Identity Theory has been used to examine the relationship consumers develop with brands. The application of this theory is useful because it illustrates how the notion of brand identification can evolve from relationships that consumers form with a brand. Specifically, brand identification is defined as a consumer's connection with a brand – such that there is a perceived oneness with the brand (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). For instance, Kuenzel and Halliday (2010) apply the theory to understand how positive brand reputation and brand personality congruence will lead to brand identification, thereby resulting in brand loyalty. Kuenzel and Halliday's (2010) findings confirm that the more highly regarded a brand is, the more likely a consumer will be to identify with it. In addition, if a consumer has a personal association with the personality of the brand, this will also result in brand identification (Kuenzel & Halliday, 2010).

Social Identity Theory has also been applied to understand the concept of brand identification among a retail sales force. Badrinarayanan and Leverie (2011) contend that a retailer's sales force acts as an advocate of its brand, and thus communicates the value of the brand to consumers. The authors argue that this brand identification relationship is just as important as a customer--firm brand identification relationship. Thus, if salespeople have strong brand identification with the brand they are selling, they elicit greater sales effort for the brand, and, in turn, become advocates of the brand (Badrinarayanan & Leverie, 2011). This notion is important to brand identification because it further explains the idea that if individuals form a "oneness" with a brand, they apply higher value and assign more specific meaning to the brand.

The findings from these studies have distinct implications for how fashion consumer groups perceive brands. That is, they suggest that as fashion consumer groups develop a certain level of group distinctiveness, they establish identification through apparel brands that offer characteristics that correlate with the group's unique traits. This identification suggests the assigning of certain group-related meanings to apparel brands by the group's members through their identification with the brand. Yet, very little research exists which investigates such identification via apparel brands. This dissertation therefore seeks to augment the overall brand identification literature, as it enhances the overall understanding of how fashion leaders use brands in their experiences of group membership.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this dissertation is to understand how consumers use clothing to identify with fashion consumer groups, specifically fashion leaders, and to understand the role of brands in this process. Three key objectives were defined relative to this purpose: (a) to investigate how fashion leaders use clothing to define their group identity and membership; (b) to examine the place of brands in the fashion leadership experience; and (c) to explore how fashion leadership and group membership is facilitated by the clothing swap environment.

To address the study's purpose and objectives, data were collected within the in-person and online clothing swap environment. A new type of consumption environment, swaps provide an appropriate context for observing fashion consumer group behavior. Because very little academic research exists on clothing swaps, a qualitative approach was appropriate in order to explore the broader meanings of the phenomenon. Likewise, because most research on fashion consumer groups is quantitative in nature (Belleau & Nowlin, 2001; Cho & Workman, 2011; Michon, Yu, Smith, & Chebat, 2007; Workman & Cho, 2012), studies such as this dissertation which employ a qualitative approach provide an examination of deeper meanings of fashion consumer group membership and their fashion-related behaviors.

Methodological Framework

Understanding how fashion consumer groups, and specifically fashion leaders, define their group identity and membership through clothing is the primary goal of this dissertation. To address this goal, an ethnographic framework was used. According to

Mariampolski (2006), as a type of qualitative inquiry, ethnography is grounded in the belief that culture is the foundation of human understanding. Examining the behaviors individuals display in the context of culture helps to provide depth to our understanding of what these behaviors mean. Ethnography typically involves data collection and analysis through the use of fieldwork. The researcher is the primary instrument for data collection through his or her immersion in the environment. Ethnography, thus, involves *learning from* people instead of *studying* people (Spradley, 1979).

As will be discussed in-depth in Chapter III, in order to address the objectives of the study, common methods of ethnography were employed in this dissertation, including participant observation, fieldnotes, and in-depth interviews. Participant observation took place in the form of attendance at five in-person clothing swap parties. I engaged in swapping clothing with the other guests while observing their interactions with each other. I also observed their decision-making with respect to the swap. Observations were recorded as field notes during the event, which were typed in full after each event.

In-depth interviews were employed to gain deeper insight into the clothing swap experience as well as fashion leaders' clothing related behaviors. Specifically, I conducted two types of semi-structured interviews: "closet interviews" and post-swap party interviews. The "closet interviews" involved the host of the swap party giving a tour of her closet while discussing her apparel-related behaviors and preferences. Post-swap party interviews involved discussion of participant's swap experience and clothing behaviors. At least two individuals from each event were chosen for post-swap party interviews. A total of sixteen interviews were conducted, five with party hosts and

eleven with party guests. Overall, the of interviews allowed me to gain a more in-depth understanding of how participants use clothing to establish and maintain identity and group membership, as well as meanings they assign to apparel brands.

To more fully understand the swap party as a cultural phenomenon, I also examined web-based swap behavior exhibited on five popular clothing swap websites. To do this, I relied on techniques used in netnography. Netnography is defined as “ethnography adapted to the study of online communities” (Kozinets, 2002, p. 63). The process involves gathering, analyzing, and interpreting data within the confines of an online culture. Given the presence of many online clothing swap communities, it is important to understand how consumers identify with one another through apparel-related behaviors in the online exchange, particularly since they cannot physically touch, feel, and examine the items as they would during a “live” clothing swap party event. Indeed, it is possible that brands are even more important in the Internet versus live swap environment, as online swappers may rely more on brand identification than they would otherwise given the lack of opportunity for physical interaction with the clothing. Observation of swap websites therefore allowed for the development of a more comprehensive understanding of clothing swap behavior.

Scope and Significance of the Study

Uncovering the behaviors of fashion leaders is important to understanding how they identify with brands. Past research has shown that consumers place certain brands in high regard based on a brand’s equity, but few studies have examined how fashion consumer groups relate to a brand, or use it to establish group identity. Likewise, very

little extant research addresses brand identification as it relates to fashion consumer group behavior. That is, the majority of brand identification studies do not focus on specific groups of consumers, and instead look primarily at the perspective of consumers as individuals. By examining the concept of brand identification relative to fashion consumer groups, the present study sheds light on how meanings are assigned to apparel brands as part of the identification process. This process has implications for understanding how brand meanings can be used to reinforce feelings of being a part of a distinct group. Because the relationships between brand meaning and identification have not been extensively examined, little is known about how fashion leaders connect with their preferred apparel brands. Because these groups exhibit a high level of interest in apparel, it is important to understand why they may identify more strongly with one apparel brand over another, an understanding that will have important implications for marketers looking to connect with these consumers.

By approaching the topic from an ethnographic perspective, I am able to explore the complexities of fashion leadership and group membership within the context of clothing exchange. This perspective is important because the existing literature focuses primarily on understanding fashion consumer groups from a quantitative perspective – a perspective which does not provide insight into experiences of such consumer groups. An ethnographic methodological framework allowed for the underlying meanings of such experiences to emerge within the framework of the clothing swap, an emerging consumption phenomenon. An understanding of how consumers use clothing to express membership within specific fashion consumer groups, and the role brand plays in this

process is currently lacking in the literature, and especially from a qualitative perspective. The ethnographic approach used in this study highlights the social context in which fashion consumer groups operate to establish group identity and membership, and, in turn, helps to uncover the ways they identify with specific apparel brands.

Alongside an emic explanation of the ways that fashion leaders identify with brands, the swap environment also permitted observation of consumption behaviors as expressed during the actual exchange process. As a result, this dissertation addresses a major gap in the literature, insofar as most fashion consumer group research has been conducted outside of the actual decision-making/shopping process. By the same token, a focus on clothing exchange is lacking in the current literature on brand equity. Given the current economic environment, the clothing swap is a crucial consumption “culture” to examine. Because consumers may have less discretionary income to allocate towards clothing, the clothing swap environment means they can acquire apparel as well as specific brands that they may not be able to afford to purchase. Thus, it is important to consider the role of clothing swaps relative to consumers’ apparel decision-making.

Summary

In this chapter, I provided a background for the study and presented the research purpose and objectives. I also provided justification for the study. In addition to discussion of concepts important to the study, the methodological framework was outlined. Last, the scope and the significance of the study were explained. The next chapter presents a review of literature pertinent to the study.

CHAPTER II

THE LITERATURE THAT INFORMS THE RESEARCH

As introduced in the previous chapter, the guiding question of this dissertation is: *How do consumers use clothing to identify with specific fashion consumer groups, and what role does brand play in this process?* In light of the central research question, this chapter examines existing research relevant to three core concepts: fashion consumer groups, brands, and identification. A discussion of the clothing swap trend is also presented, as it provides the overall context for the study.

This chapter begins with an overview of the development of the clothing swap phenomenon. I then summarize the literature relevant to fashion consumer groups. Third, literature pertinent to the general concept of brand equity, and specifically that of brand meaning, is explored. Last, the notion of identification as well as its connection to the topics of brands and fashion consumer groups is examined. By discussing the research relevant to these three core concepts and considering the consumption environment of the swap, this chapter highlights gaps in the existing literature and indicates the specific areas in need of further investigation that are addressed by this study.

Clothing Exchange (AKA “Swaps”)

The womenswear market is a valuable economic entity and has become intensely competitive in recent decades, as new fashion retailers constantly enter the marketplace.

As more retailers enter the marketplace, a greater interest in fashion is fostered among consumers (Bianchi & Birtwistle, 2010). This consumer interest is clear, as according to Mintel (2010), U.S. women spend, on average, \$597 on apparel annually, and eight out of ten women in the U.S. have made an apparel purchase within the last year.

In recent years, however, some women have gravitated toward acquiring clothing through the medium of exchange rather than purchasing something new. Although clothing exchanges have been commonly linked to the 1970's, recently, clothing exchange events or "swaps" have become more prevalent given the economic downturn (Roux & Korchia, 2006). Clothing exchange events typically involve small groups of individuals coming together to "swap" items, such as clothes and accessories, while also using the opportunity to socialize (Albinsson & Perera, 2009). During these events, clothes and accessories are organized by size and type, and then further merchandised for shopping appeal (Albinsson & Perera, 2009; Ryzik, 2006b). As mentioned in Chapter I, quite often the "one in and one out" rule is enforced, which means that an individual is allowed to take one item for every item that she or he donates (Ryzik, 2006b).

The clothing swap trend gained initial popularity as a "girl's night in" phenomenon, but has now reached new heights. Beyond the more intimate at home clothing swap party, clothing exchange events are being held in public places where groups as large as 100+ are welcome (Ryzik, 2006a). For instance, Wendy Tremayne, the founder of Swap-O-Rama, initiated a local swapping event in 2004 as an alternative to consumerism. This led to repeated local events involving in-person clothing swaps with individuals in her immediate community. Seven years later, her Swap-O-Rama

clothing swaps are now franchised to local organizers in regions around the U.S.

Locations such as Durham, NC and Washington, DC have implemented their own Swap-O-Rama events (Ryzik, 2006a). These clothing exchange events appeal to a wide range of consumers, representing a broad spectrum of ages and income levels, and include those who are fashion-forward as well as those who are not necessarily fashion-oriented but looking for something different (Ryzik, 2006a).

Over the past five years, the clothing swap phenomenon has gained so much interest that it now extends beyond local, in-person events and is a regular occurrence via the Internet. For example Swapstyle.com, currently in its 9th year, claims to be the world's largest and most popular free online women's fashion swap site. The site has 55,000 active members, and allows members to join the website and create a profile, browse clothing, and then exchange clothing and accessories with other members. Quite often, apparel brands are featured on these online swap sites, allowing clothing swappers access to stylish branded items for little to no cost (Krugel, 2011).

Clothing swap websites are not limited to womenswear. Many different swapping websites are being created that allow consumers the opportunity to exchange diverse kinds of products. For example, ThredUP.com is a swapping website that targets kid's items, and includes children's clothing, toys, and books. The founder of this site, James Reinhart, began with the realization that by the age of seventeen the average American will outgrow 1,300 items, therefore, he thought that the secondhand market made sense for this particular demographic (Winter, 2011). Reinhardt's website allows moms to bundle various items in boxes and then offer them for swapping with other moms based

on the age and size of their children. Swappers then gain “badges” from the moms who receive their boxes and are satisfied with the contents. These “badges” serve as a stamp of credibility for other moms who may consider swapping with this individual. The San Francisco based website now has almost 200,000 members, with approximately 1,000 new members joining each week for a \$30 annual membership fee (Winter, 2011).

The phenomenon of clothing exchange can also be examined from a more traditional marketing perspective. That is, one of the most common outcomes of marketing is that an actual exchange takes place (Lamb, Hair, &McDaniel, 2008). According to Lamb et al. (2008), exchange is defined as “people giving up something to receive something they would rather have” (p. 6). The authors contend that although money is normally used to complete an exchange, it does not necessarily have to be traded in the exchange process. Instead, two people can barter or trade items to solidify the exchange process (Lamb et al., 2008). The authors consider how exchange provides value through the four p’s of marketing: *product*, *price*, *promotion*, and *place* (see Figure 2). Clearly clothing exchange is an alternative to monetary exchange, yet the components of Lamb et al.’s framework can still be applied. For example, swaps require a reciprocal relationship between two parties or individuals (A and B), which results in value for both. The product, which is the starting point of the exchange process, is the offering, physical unit, or tangible good that is desired by the individual/swapper (Lamb et al., 2008). The location where the product is exchanged is referred to as the place. This could be at an in-person swap or online. Promotion includes advertising and personal selling that informs and attracts target markets to the place of exchange (Lamb

et al., 2008). Most in-person swaps require an invitation, and most online swaps require site membership. Last, price is what the buyer (or swapper) is willing to give up to acquire a specific product. That is, what they bring to the exchange for the purposes of acquiring something different.

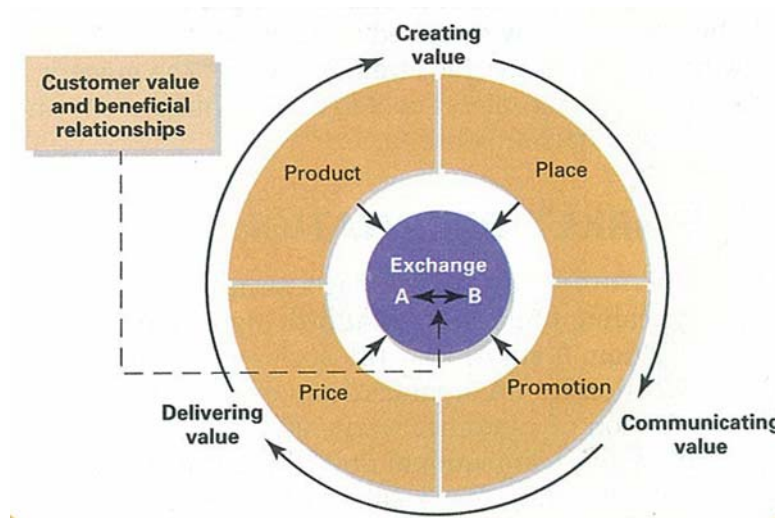


Figure 2. Exchange, Value, and the Four P's

Adapted from: Lamb, C., Hair, J., & McDaniel, C. (2008). *Marketing*. Mason, OH: South-Western Cengage Learning.

Given the breadth and increasing popularity of the clothing swap phenomenon, one would assume that this topic has been comprehensively researched. Surprisingly, there are few studies that focus on it. Instead, research thus far has focused on clothing disposal behavior and the motivations that lead to the form of disposal a consumer chooses. For instance, Bianchi and Birtwistle (2010) examine clothing disposal behavior of consumers from two different countries in their article *Sell, give away, or donate: An exploratory study of fashion clothing disposal behavior in two countries*. The authors

contend that consumers dispose of their clothing in three different ways: economic disposal behavior (i.e. sell clothing on Ebay), giving to family or friends disposal behavior, or donating to charity disposal behavior. The authors investigate fashion innovativeness, awareness of the environment, and general recycling behavior as independent variables to examine the factors that affect a consumer's choice of clothing disposal (Bianchi & Birtwistle, 2010). Their findings reveal that general recycling behavior was the only independent variable that was a predictor for donating to charities in both countries. Although the correlation between recycling behavior and donation to charities is interesting, the article does not examine consumer motivations behind giving away clothing to family and friends. Moreover, the instrument included the statement "I swap clothing with friends and family members" – yet the swapping process was not investigated by the authors. Thus, how the clothing was swapped, which items or brands individuals chose to swap, or the rationale for swapping specific clothing items were not investigated. All are important motivations that should be investigated given the prevalence of clothing swapping among consumers.

From a different perspective, Albinsson and Perera's 2009 article *From trash to treasure and beyond: The meaning of voluntary disposition* explores motivations behind clothing disposal and does so specifically in the clothing exchange context. The goal of the study was to explore the relevance of relationships, values, and self-concept in regards to consumer disposal behaviors (Albinsson & Perera, 2009). The authors conclude that consumers mainly attend clothing exchange events to dispose of used goods for utilitarian reasons, like engaging in sustainability practices, but that hedonic

motivations such as socializing, eating, and drinking were also important reasons for participation. While these findings are significant, the authors did not explore the behaviors or practices that shape clothing exchange culture. In addition, the authors did not examine the specific items and brands swapped during these events, nor did they assess decision-making of consumers in the swap context. There is a need to understand such behaviors as it will allow for a deeper understanding of what clothing swaps mean for individuals as well as groups of consumers, particularly fashion consumer groups.

Fashion Consumer Groups

In order to fully understand the concept of fashion consumer groups, one must begin with the work of Everett M. Rogers. In *Diffusion of Innovations* (1962) Rogers posits that consumers have distinct adoption patterns when presented with new product options. As discussed briefly in Chapter I, according to Rogers, there are five basic adoption categories: *innovators* (2.5% of the population), *early adopters* (12.5% of the population), *early majority* (34% of the population), *late majority* (34% of the population), and *laggards* (16% of the population). Understanding how an innovation moves through the population can help marketers predict when certain groups will accept new products. Roger's Diffusion Theory is seminal, as it was the first step in defining consumer groups and can clearly be applied across product categories to include consumer acceptance of new apparel styles.

Since its introduction, much research has gone on to apply as well as further develop the diffusion concept (e.g., Beaudoin, Lachance, & Robitaille, 2003; Cavusoglu, Hu, Li & Ma, 2010; Greve, 2009; Johnson, Lennon, Jasper, Damhorst, & Lakner, 2003).

In 1978, Hirschman and Adcock developed a scale to differentiate between consumer groups relative to fashion. As pointed out in Chapter I, the scale identifies four fashion-oriented consumer groups: *fashion opinion leaders*, *fashion innovators*, *fashion followers*, and *innovative communicators* (Hirschman & Adcock, 1978). Given their diverse characteristics, each group has distinct preferences, perceptions, and behaviors towards apparel brands, and interacts differently with respect to apparel and fashion trends. For instance, fashion opinion leaders tend to be more interested in fashion magazines in order to keep abreast of fashion trends, while fashion followers are not as interested in fashion magazines and tend to adopt fashion trends at a slower rate (Workman & Caldwell, 2007).

Sproles and Burns (1989) extended the fashion group concept by examining the rate at which individuals in certain fashion consumer groups adopt new fashions. The authors developed a diagram to illustrate the level of acceptance of a particular fashion by consumer groups, depending on the fashion novelty's diffusion cycle (see Figure 3). Specifically, their bell shaped curve depicts how fashion innovators adopt a fashion trend when it is first introduced to the market and is still considered a novelty. The curve also shows that fashion followers adopt the fashion trend after the mass market when the trend is considered low novelty.

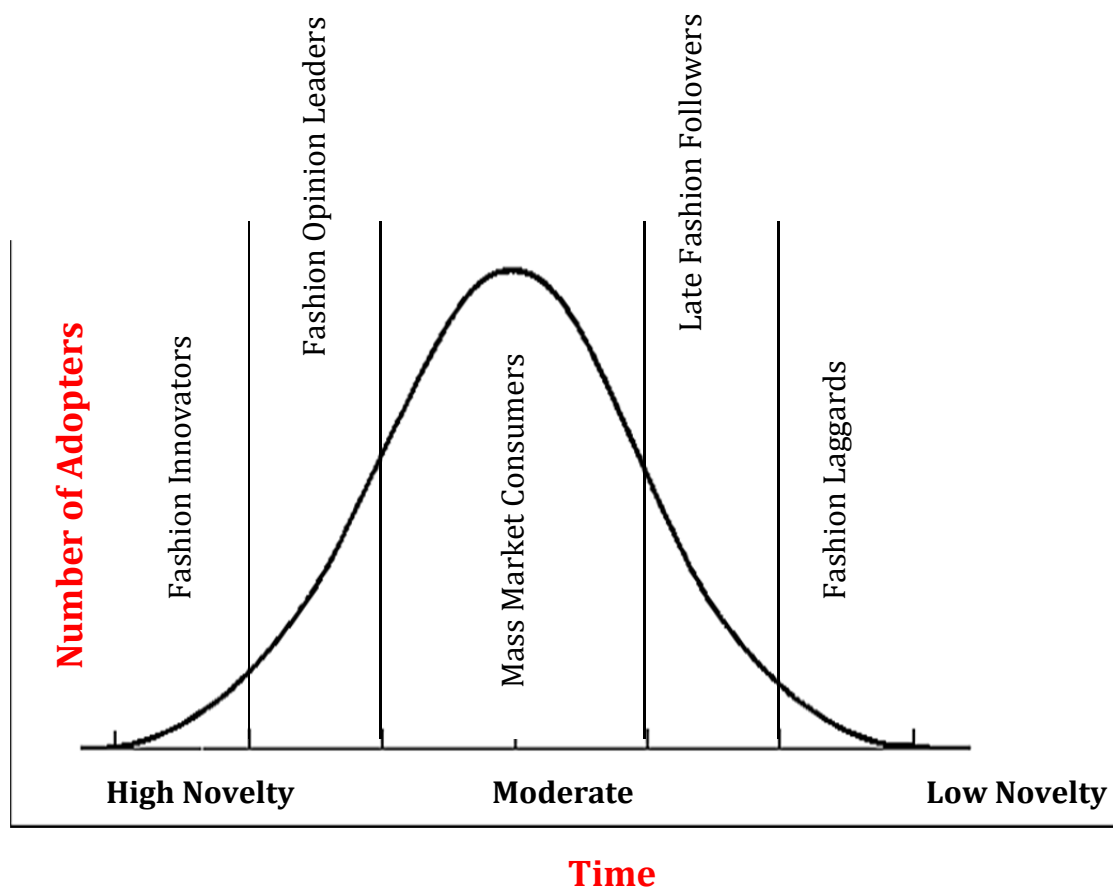


Figure 3. Fashion Consumer Groups and Rate of Adoption
Adapted from: Sproles, G.B. & Burns, L.D. (1989). *Changing appearances: Understanding appearances in contemporary society*. New York: Fairchild Publications.

Workman and Kidd (2000) further broadened the idea of fashion consumer groups by identifying the fundamental characteristics that each group possesses. According to Workman and Kidd (2000), the fashion opinion leader group has a more favorable attitude towards new products, and particularly new apparel styles. In addition, this group is interested in communicating information about fashion styles, and uses fashion resources such as magazines frequently to garner fashion information (Workman & Kidd, 2000). Fashion innovators share some commonalities with fashion opinion

leaders, however, fashion innovators are more focused on using clothing to express their individuality. Fashion innovators also take greater risks in their apparel choices, and are among the first of the fashion consumer groups to adopt and wear new styles (Workman & Kidd, 2000). Another characteristic of fashion innovators is that they wear styles/trends for a relatively short period of time, because once other groups adopt a trend, innovators will stop wearing it in order to maintain their individuality (Workman & Kidd, 2000).

The fashion consumer group that is the marked opposite of the fashion innovator group is that of the fashion follower. According to Workman and Kidd (2000), this group is the most cautious of the consumer groups, and is less willing to take risks with new styles. As a matter of fact, fashion followers will normally not adopt a style/trend until that style/trend has been proven successful by other groups. Given this fact, they have very little need for variety in their clothing (Workman & Kidd, 2000). Last, the innovative communicator group is a rather unique fashion consumer group. According to the authors, innovative communicators actually have characteristics of both fashion innovators and fashion opinion leaders, except that innovative communicators will usually spend more money on clothing and are very connected to specific apparel brands and styles. In addition, innovative communicators tend to be younger and more socially active than the other fashion consumer groups (Workman & Kidd, 2000).

Although the literature reveals compelling information about the distinctive characteristics and fashion orientations of these different consumer groups, most studies do not examine specific behaviors in depth. In addition, most do not investigate the role

of brand in relation to group identity or membership. Nor do these existing studies provide explanations as to why a group might identify more strongly with one brand over another in light of their distinctive traits and group identity. Thus, a better understanding of brand identification is needed, as it would shed light on the value that these groups place on specific apparel brands. The present study, therefore, addresses these gaps by examining the role of brands specifically in relation to fashion consumer group identity and membership.

The topic of fashion consumer groups has evolved over the years to become a fairly extensive research area (e.g., Bailey & Seock, 2008; Bertrandias & Goldsmith, 2006; Beaudoin, Moore, & Goldsmith, 2000; Byun & Sternquist, 2011; Phau & Lo, 2004). Most studies focus on fashion innovators and fashion opinion leaders. For instance, the article *Profiling fashion innovators: A study of self-concept, impulse buying, and internet purchase intent* (Phau & Lo, 2004) provides a demographic profile of fashion innovators, and examines whether fashion innovativeness leads to higher instances of impulse buying and Internet purchasing. According to the authors, fashion innovators cultivate a unique self-image marked by the characteristics of being “excitable, indulgent, contemporary, liberal, and colorful” (Phau & Lo, 2004, p. 406). Results of the study point to a high incidence of impulse buying among fashion innovators, yet their use of the Internet to purchase products was not significant in comparison to other groups.

Workman (2010) draws comparisons between several fashion consumer groups in a study on purchase intent and the role of need for touch. The author organizes the four

traditional fashion consumer groups into two distinct segments: *fashion change agents* (innovative communicators, fashion innovators, and fashion opinion leaders) and *fashion followers*. Workman (2010) posits that fashion change agents and fashion followers will differ in their need for touch during the shopping process, and that the two genders will likewise pose a difference in terms of need for touch. Based upon the consumer motivation theory, Workman (2010) hypothesized that males and fashion followers will have a low need for touch, while fashion change agents and females will have a high need for touch. Findings indicate that fashion change agents do, in fact, have a higher need for touch in the shopping process versus fashion followers. In addition, women were found to have a higher need for touch versus men.

The fashion consumer group concept has also been applied relative to the topic of shopping motivations. *Hedonic and utilitarian shopping motivations of fashion leadership* by Kang and Park-Poaps (2010) sought to examine fashion leadership as it pertains to shopping motivations. The authors assessed the utilitarian and hedonic (adventure, gratification, role, value, social, and idea) shopping motivations of 150 college students considered to be either fashion innovators or opinion leaders. Results indicate that fashion innovativeness is significantly correlated with the hedonic shopping values of adventure, idea, and value, while fashion opinion leadership was correlated with utilitarian motivations.

Because fashion innovators and opinion leaders are at the front end of the diffusion cycle, they share many of the same characteristics and fashion-related behaviors. As a result, they are referred to more generally as fashion leaders (as

compared to fashion followers), as is the case in the present study. Fashion leadership is typically characterized by a strong interest in fashion, frequent apparel shopping, and a need for uniqueness as expressed through apparel choices (Kang & Park-Poaps, 2010 & Workman & Caldwell, 2007). These characteristics frame how participants in the present study were defined. It should be noted, however, that identification of such characteristics is somewhat surface in nature, as few if any studies exist on fashion leadership from a qualitative perspective. Thus, this dissertation addresses a major gap in the literature while providing much needed insight into what it means to be a fashion leader.

In a similar vein, though the literature on fashion consumer groups is extensive (Cho & Workman, 2011; Goldsmith & Clark, 2008; Goldsmith, Flynn, & Moore, 1996; Park, Burns, & Rabolt, 2007; Workman & Cho, 2012), few studies examine how fashion leaders relate to apparel brands within the fashion leadership experience, or indicate how they use brands to establish and communicate group membership. Moreover, understanding how fashion consumer groups assign meaning to brands may help retailers better target these different groups. This dissertation addresses this gap in the literature by exploring the brands that fashion leaders identify with and the functions that brands serve within the fashion leadership experience.

Brand Research

Over the last twenty years, branding and brand equity have been the subject of a great deal of marketing research. Although the topic has been examined from multiple perspectives, David Aaker has been most frequently cited as the “father of branding.”

Aaker's seminal work *Managing Brand Equity* (1991) was the first to clearly define brand equity and specify factors important to the concept. Aaker's definition has not only been referenced by academics, but is also commonly applied in business practice and industry. Aaker's work gave way to extensive study of the topic, and ushered in a new way of thinking about brands and their impact on the marketplace.

As discussed briefly in Chapter I, Aaker (1991) outlines five categories of assets for brand equity: (1) *brand loyalty*, (2) *brand awareness*, (3) *perceived quality*, (4) *brand associations*, and (5) *other proprietary brand assets*. Aaker highlights the five factors that a firm should focus on to drive value for the offerings they provide. According to Aaker, once this value is created in the minds of consumers, they will be more attracted to the brand and exhibit enhanced loyalty toward the brand, which ultimately leads to the brand establishing a competitive advantage over others (Aaker, 1991).

Aaker's concept of brand equity has been extended to areas beyond the traditional marketing/consumer behavior scope (e.g., Juntunen, Juntunen, & Juga, 2011; Pappu, Quester, & Cooksey, 2005; Rego, Billett, & Morgan, 2009). For instance, Wang, Hsu, Hsu and Hsieh (2011) apply Aaker's brand equity principles to the hospital industry. In the article *Constructing an index for brand equity: A hospital example* the authors use the notion of brand equity to assess the differences between two hospitals that offer the same services yet have different hospital brand names. In essence, the study tests the intangible value that a specific hospital brand name can convey (Wang et al., 2011). In addition, the authors develop a brand equity index that hospitals can use to create value in

their offerings. Their study illustrates the extent to which diverse industries have implemented Aaker's principles.

Some researchers, however, take a different approach regarding the concept of brand equity (e.g., Jung & Sung, 2008; Keller, 1993; Moore, Wilkie, & Lutz, 2002; Rego, Billett, & Morgan, 2009). For example, Keller (1993) contends that brand equity should be conceptualized for application in order to allow marketers to judge the value of their brands in the eyes of the customer. Thus, Keller's approach to brand equity – called Customer-Based Brand Equity – is more customer focused. Customer-Based Brand Equity is defined as “the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand” (Keller, 1993, p. 8).

Keller outlines three key concepts based on this definition: *differential effect*, *brand knowledge*, and *consumer response to marketing*. The differential effect refers to the difference between the consumer's response to the marketing of a specific brand and their response to similar marketing of a generic version (Keller, 1993). Brand knowledge combines the concepts of brand awareness and brand image and considers how both relate to brand associations; while consumer response to marketing is described as a consumer's assessments, preferences, and behaviors regarding various brands within the marketplace (Keller, 1993). Essentially, Keller's (1993) evaluation of brand equity focuses on measuring brand equity from the consumer's perspective, taking into account their level of awareness and image of the brand.

Measuring brand equity is a frequent theme within brand equity literature, as a large number of brand equity articles are quantitative in nature (e.g., Cobb-Walgren,

Beal, & Donthu, 1995; Erdem & Swait, 1998; Simon & Sullivan, 1993). Moreover, many scholars have sought to develop scales to precisely measure brand equity dimensions (e.g., Arnett, Lavarie, & Meiers, 2003; Diamantopolous & Winklhofer, 2001; Fisher, 2007). Once scales were developed, validation was needed, which resulted in further quantitative brand equity research (e.g., Chen & Tseng, 2010; Henseler & Wilson, 2011; Kocak, Abimbola, & Ozar, 2007).

Other studies rely on secondary data to examine brand equity. For instance, Kamakura and Russell (1993) used consumer scanner data to confirm the value of a brand. Based on 51 weeks of retail scanner data from the top ten national consumer brands, the authors assessed brand equity based on buying behavior as exhibited by the data (Kamakura & Russell, 1993). Although findings are important – as the study uses actual scanner data – it does not deal with brand equity beyond assessment of the scanned and purchased products. Instead, the study assumes that because consumers actually purchase the brands they obviously assign it greater value.

In a similar vein, Yoo and Donthu (2001) sought to measure the cognitive and behavioral aspects of brand equity, while determining psychometric properties that had yet to be examined in previous brand equity studies. The authors created brand equity scale items, tested them cross-culturally with U.S. and Korean consumers, and assessed the internal consistency, validity, and cross-cultural metric equivalence of the scales. The authors asked consumers to evaluate twelve brands from three product categories – athletic shoes, film, and TVs – in order to determine if their scale was reliable and generalizable across cultures. Although the findings are important to the literature on

brand equity, the study is more concerned with confirming the scale than exploring how and why cross-cultural groups assign meaning to certain brands.

Around the late 1990's, a new school of thought emerged in the literature on brand equity which approaches the topic from more of an interpretive and consumer-centric perspective (e.g., Braun-LaTour, LaTour, & Zinkhan, 2007; Brown, Sherry, & Kozinets, 2003; Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2010; Thompson & Haytko, 1997). Not just concerned with scales and measurements, this new approach sought what quantitative measurements cannot thoroughly capture. For instance, one study by Ligas and Cotte (1999) titled *The process of negotiating brand meaning: A Symbolic Interactionist perspective* approached the topic of brand meaning from the framework of Symbolic Interactionism. Symbolic Interactionism posits that people act toward things based on the meanings they have assigned to them, and that these meanings are derived through social interaction. Specifically, the researchers state that there are three environments involved in brand meaning: the marketing environment, the social environment, and the individual environment (Ligas & Cotte, 1999). Through the process of the “interaction” between these three environments, an individual assigns meaning to a brand, which is referred to as “negotiated brand meaning” (Ligas & Cotte, 1999). Thus, according to the authors, the value of any given brand is socially constructed by the consumer.

Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) further examined the idea of socially constructed brand meaning in their article titled, *Brand community*. The authors used ethnographic and computer environment data to investigate the characteristics and processes within three brand communities: Ford Bronco, Mac (Apple), and Saab. The results of the study

revealed that members of brand communities form alliances through the meanings they ascribe to the brands they consume, and that brand communities demonstrate the three traditional markers of community: shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and sense of moral responsibility (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). The study confirms that brand meanings are actively created by consumers and are socially composed (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001), thereby illustrating how meaning is derived from the connections that individuals within a brand community share with one another.

Similar to Muniz and O’Guinn, Escalas and Bettman’s (2005) article *Self-construal, reference groups, and brand meaning* posits that consumers select brands with meanings that are congruent with their self-concept and associated with their reference groups. The authors assert that reference groups further promote a brand’s meaning based on the associations of the group with the brand, and that membership in a reference group contributes to the development of brand meaning (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). In addition, the authors reveal that consumers have a stronger brand connection with those brands that connote images that are consistent with their reference groups or “in-group” (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). The study shows how brand meaning is not only communicated within the context of a reference group, but may be strengthened through the symbolic congruency of the brand with the reference group.

Humans typically seek association with social groups (Solomon, 2009). Being categorized as a member of a certain group helps promote the image of self that an individual desires to portray (Schau, Muniz, & Arnould, 2009). Given the need for group association, individuals intentionally seek out groups that will allow them to affirm and

promote their assessments of themselves (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). The topics of brand equity, brand meaning, and fashion consumer groups are reflexively connected through this notion of identification, as individuals may choose specific apparel brands to establish and/or maintain their membership within a particular fashion consumer group, and fashion consumer groups use particular brands to establish in-group meanings and communicate group identity.

Quester, Beverland, and Farrelly's (2006) article *Brand-personal values fit and brand meanings: Exploring the role individual values play in ongoing brand loyalty in extreme sports subcultures* approaches the topic of brand meaning from the perspective of extreme sports subcultures. The study sought to better understand how members of Australian skating and surfing subcultures assign meanings to skating/surfing sports brands. Specifically, the authors explore how this subculture's "life theme" and core values impact choice of brands (Quester et al., 2006). The findings suggest that there are four core values/meanings that members of this subculture use to make their brand purchasing decisions: freedom, belongingness, excellence, and connection (Quester et al., 2006). Skating and surf brands that "fit" into these core values are the brands that the subculture prefers and loyally supports, largely because these brands exhibit authenticity and value as related to the core meanings.

The concept of identification has often been explored from the perspective of brand equity (Badrinarayanan & Laverie, 2011; Hughes & Ahearne, 2010). For example, the article *Indian Consumers' Brand Equity toward a U.S. and Local Apparel Brand* (Lee, Kumar, & Kim, 2010) evaluates three dimensions of brand equity based on Indian

respondents' past experiences with shopping for U.S. and local Indian brands.

Specifically, the study examines the effects of gender, need for uniqueness, and attitude toward the Levi's brand, and employs the construct of brand equity as the main tool for assessing how Indian consumers identify with Levi's jeans. Results indicate that need for uniqueness positively influenced three brand equity dimensions: perceived quality, brand loyalty, and brand associations. Such a finding is significant as it suggests that perceptions of brand uniqueness help to establish brand identification through brand meaning.

Soulmates, Best Friends, and Casual Buddies: The Relationship of U.S. college Students to Retailer Brands by Kim and Kwon (2011) examines college students' relationships with retailer brands based on three interpersonal relationship metaphors: soulmates, best friends, and casual buddies. This metaphor approach is derived from Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love, and stems from the idea that people form relationships with brands that lead to unique brand connections and meanings (Kim & Kwon, 2011). The authors examine how consumers categorize specific brands as either a friend or confidant, revealing a deep level of identification. For the study, college students participated in a memory exercise where they were asked to describe their relationship with retail brands by pretending that the retailers were people. The authors found that consumers have a stronger identification with retail brands that they consider to be "soulmates," and that these brands hold deeper personal meaning. In addition, the study indicated that retailers that have reached the status of "soulmate" are allowed to

make mistakes, such as in quality or aesthetic presentation, because consumers have more trust and a stronger sense of connection with them.

Although the literature concerning brand equity and meaning is extensive, the majority of the research is quantitative in nature (e.g., Christodoulides & de Chernatony, 2004; Lee, Kumar, & Kim, 2010; Loken & John, 1993). Thus, while many studies have defined and measured the components of brand equity, few have provided insight into the unique and oftentimes very personal meanings that consumers assign to brands. That is, the scales and measurements used to assess brand equity do not capture the actual sentiments of respondents, thus, depth of understanding is lacking. To address this gap, the present study uses a qualitative approach to establish a more in-depth understanding of the meaning that consumers assign to apparel brands. Although there are a number of studies that explore brand meaning from an interpretivist perspective (e.g., Coupland, 2005; Orend & Gagne, 2009), the qualitative literature on this topic mainly focuses on broad group types – such as brand communities (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001), reference groups (Escalas & Bettman, 2005), or subcultures (Arthur, 2006; Matzler, Pichler, Fuller, & Mooradian, 2011; Quester et al., 2006). Although these studies provide much needed insight into the topic of brand meaning, an interpretive approach has yet to be applied to understanding apparel brand meaning, and specifically as related to fashion consumer groups.

It is important to note that the majority of brand research asks consumers to consider their brand perceptions in retrospect instead of during the actual shopping/decision-making process (Arnett, Laverie, & Wilcox, 2010; Sojka & Giese,

2003). Assessing shopping behaviors in retrospect can be problematic, in that consumers may not remember the actual thought processes followed or their precise motivations and values at the time. In addition, respondents may not be able to effectively express how they identify with a particular product outside of the context of actually purchasing or using the product. Thus, it is imperative to understand the role of brand during the decision-making process, and this dissertation does so within the context of clothing exchange – an actual “shopping” environment. In particular, this dissertation examines how fashion consumer groups associate with brands through the process of identification within the exchange context, thereby adding dimension to the existing research on consumer behavior and brands.

Conceptual Framework

Components of Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory provides the theoretical point of departure for this dissertation. As discussed in Chapter I, Social Identity Theory suggests that individuals categorize themselves into specific social groups and, according to Tajfel and Turner (1979), this categorization allows individuals to articulate their experiences within the social order. The theory consists of four components: *social identity*, *social categorization*, *social comparison*, and *group distinctiveness* (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). *Social categorization* is defined as the process of an individual ordering his/her social environment into groups, while *social identity* entails enhancing one’s self- concept by gaining membership in a social group. *Social comparison* involves individuals comparing themselves to others based upon their group affiliations, and, lastly, *group*

distinctiveness involves differentiating one group from other groups based upon unique group characteristics and norms. According to the Social Identity Theory, as individuals confirm membership in a group, a sense of identification leads to practices that reinforce the group's interests as a whole (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Social Identity Theory has been used to examine the connections between consumers and the brands they prefer. For example, Lam, Ahearne, Hu, and Schillewaert (2010) used Social Identity Theory to define customer-brand identification. According to the authors, brand identification involves “a customer’s psychological state of perceiving, feeling, and valuing his or her belongingness with a brand” (Lam et al., 2010, p. 130). In other words, customer brand-identification involves a “oneness” with the brand. Findings highlight the fact that when a consumer perceives this brand “oneness,” he or she will be less likely to transfer to a competitive brand and will therefore become more vested in the brand. It is important to note that because this study focused on consumers as individuals, it does not shed light on how groups identify with brands.

Mael and Ashforth (1992) also assessed a brand through Social Identity Theory, and in this case, considered a specific university as a brand. The authors sought to investigate whether alumni of this all-male university so strongly identify with their alma mater that they will support the university monetarily and through recommendations to others. In other words, they examined whether the university’s brand has strong enough meaning for the alumni. The findings suggest that alumni of the university did experience a sense of organizational identification that may lead to financial support.

However, this study focuses on individuals, therefore its findings do not necessarily shed light on brand identification and groups.

In this dissertation, the four components of Social Identity Theory (social identity, social categorization, social comparison, and group distinctiveness) are examined via fashion leader apparel behaviors in the context of clothing swaps. That is, it explores how these individuals use clothing to define themselves (*social identity*) and compare themselves to others (*social comparison*) through clothing and the specific brands they value. In addition, it considers the ways that individuals categorize themselves as members of specific fashion consumer groups (*social categorization*) through the use of brands to which they assign meaning and value. Moreover, the notion of *identification* was examined relative to the concept of *social identity*. That is, how fashion leaders use clothing to identify with others, and the role brands play in this process. Last, this study examined how *group distinctiveness* is achieved in relation to fashion consumer groups to better understand the particular experiences of fashion leaders that distinguish them as a group, and how these experiences differentiate this group from other groups.

Integration of Key Concepts

As highlighted in Figure 4, interrelationships between the concepts of brand, fashion consumer groups, and identification form the conceptual framework. As depicted in the figure, two-way arrows linking the concepts of brands with identification and fashion consumer groups symbolize the reflexive nature of these interrelationships, which are positioned in the context of the clothing swap environment.

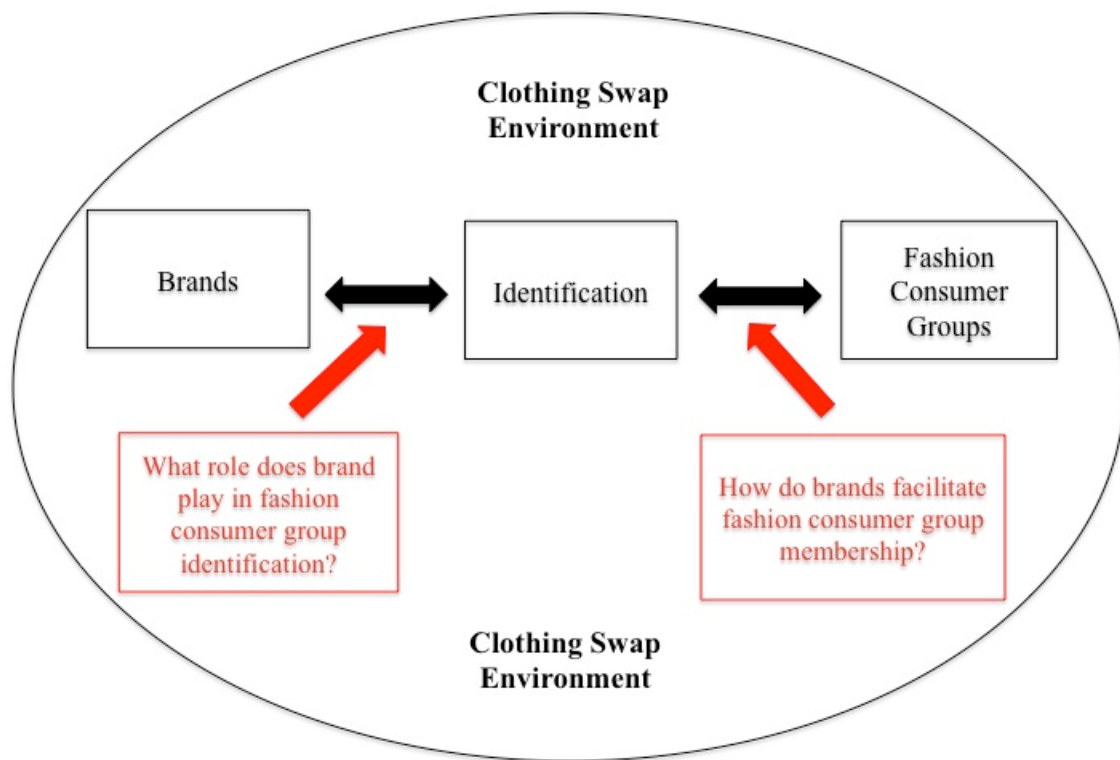


Figure 4. Proposed Conceptual Framework

Two overarching questions which stem from the constructs of Social Identity Theory were used to guide the research and are included in the framework (see Figure 4). First, I asked the question, *what role does brand play in fashion consumer group identification?*, and particularly for fashion leaders. The literature suggests that the value of a brand is socially constructed by the consumer based on perceptions of the self (Ligas & Cotte, 1999), and, in turn, brand communities are a reflection of how a brand's image can connect to the "self-concept" of the group (Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2005). It is possible that brands may help in the process of social categorization and

ultimately establishing membership in resulting social groups. Moreover, based on the idea of social comparison, brands may be used to define one group's identity as distinct from another's, while that identity, in turn, helps to articulate brand meaning.

Second, I asked the question, *How do brands facilitate fashion consumer group membership?* The literature indicates that groups use brands as a means of identification (Badrinarayanan & Laverie, 2011; Hughes & Ahearne, 2010; Kuenzel & Halliday, 2010). However, why they choose certain brands over others is not particularly clear. In other words, what is it about a brand that appeals to a particular group, given that group's identity?

Investigating the dynamics between the three core concepts within the clothing swap environment permits greater insight into the use of brands by fashion leaders, as it provides an actual, real time consumption context. Moreover, it allows for observation of group interactions and behaviors relative to apparel decision-making as it occurs.

Summary

In this chapter, I provided an overview of the relevant literature concerning the topics of clothing exchange, fashion consumer groups and brands. Gaps within the literature were highlighted relative to the goals and objectives of the present study. The conceptual framework used to guide the study was then outlined. In the next chapter, the methodological framework and methods used to collect data are explained.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This study seeks to address the question: *How do consumers use clothing to identify with specific fashion consumer groups, and what role does brand play in this process?* As discussed in Chapter I, an ethnographic perspective was employed to collect data in the context of the clothing swap party. This chapter provides an in-depth overview of the research design and consists of three parts. First, a summary of interpretive methodology and the ethnographic research approach is provided. Second, specific methods that were used to collect data within the ethnographic framework are explained. This part also includes discussion of the participants recruited for the study. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the approach to the analysis and interpretation of data.

Ethnography as Interpretive Inquiry

The purpose of this dissertation was addressed through an interpretive methodological approach. Interpretive inquiry allows for deep understanding to evolve through a focus on the subjective experiences of individuals (van Maanen, 1975). Moreover, interpretive inquiry permits a focus on understanding the meaning individuals assign to their actions and experiences (Hultgren & Coomer, 1989). By interacting with participants in their everyday lives, and, in this case, the clothing exchange process, a first-hand look at what clothing means to consumers can be developed.

At the root of the ethnographic approach is the desire to understand cultural dynamics by “walking a mile” in the participant’s shoes, and thereby gaining insight into his or her everyday life. The origins of the approach are found in anthropology during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when acquiring a descriptive account of a community or culture outside of the western hemisphere was the predominant objective (Hammersely & Atkinson, 2007). Ethnography also has its roots in the concept of ethnology, which refers to descriptive comparisons of non-Western societies to Western societies in the form of published accounts by travelers and missionaries (Hammersely & Atkinson, 2007).

Ethnography is the methodological setting for data collection and analysis (Steen & Roberts, 2009). The researcher is the primary instrument for data collection, thus, meaning is understood through the researcher’s immersion in the environment of the participants (Spradley, 1979). This immersion, or fieldwork, is what sets ethnography apart from other qualitative approaches. Ethnographic research relies considerably on observation and interaction to allow the researcher to participate – overtly or covertly – in people’s daily lives (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). In the next section, I describe the specific ethnographic methods that were utilized to collect data.

Data Collection Methods

As discussed, an ethnographic approach to data collection was employed in this dissertation. Meaning, therefore, evolved during my immersion in the research environment as a participant-observer. Data took the form of field notes as well as

transcriptions of in-depth interviews that I conducted as part of the ethnographic approach. The following sections detail each of the methods used.

Participant Observation and Fieldnotes

As individuals, we are all observers of everyday life. However, from a qualitative research perspective, observation is a much more intentional process. As a qualitative tool, observation takes place in a natural setting, and involves first-hand encounters with the phenomenon of interest. What makes observation research is the systematic recording of behavior and encounters in the setting (Merriam, 1998). In social science, the “field” is defined as the specific site for executing research, and involves “talking, listening, recording, observing, participating, and sometimes even living in a particular place” (Chiseri-Strater & Sunstein, 1997, p. 1). Thus, the field is the specific location where the observations take place.

In ethnographies, the researcher is typically a participant observer. Participant observation is a humanistic method that allows ethnographers to produce experiential knowledge (Bernard, 2002). This means that the researcher plays an intimate role in the data that emerges, and must take on a specific role in the field while establishing frequent contact with the phenomenon of interest (Mason, 1996). A researcher achieves all of this by establishing a level of familiarity with the participants that allows him or her to fit into their routines, circumstances, and activities (Merriam, 1998).

During the fieldwork process, the researcher is required to write detailed summaries that capture what is witnessed during observations. These detailed summaries are referred to as field notes, yet this does not mean the researcher transcribes every word

or instance that occurs. However, the researcher does take note of what is observed in written form, and creates a record of what happened – which may then be probed or revisited through interviews (Lofland & Lofland, 1984). Essentially, field notes are data, and should be written in a manner that chronicles what happened and when for reference purposes.

There are three types of field notes that aid the researcher in documenting field experiences. The first type of field notes is referred to as “field jottings” (Bernard, 2002). Field jottings are informal notes that are often noted in small, pocket-sized tablets. These jottings are meant to jog the researcher’s memory at the time when formal field notes are written (Lofland & Lofland, 1984). The diary is the second type of field notes. Unlike the other types of field notes which are public in nature, these notes are personal. In detail, the diary chronicles how the researcher feels and how he or she perceives relationships with participants in the field. Most importantly, the diary makes the researcher aware of the personal biases he/she may possess (Bernard, 2002). The third and final type of field notes are the full field notes. This involves the formal presentation of data that has been collected, and includes “a running description of events, people, things heard and overheard, conversations among people, and conversations with people” (Lofland & Lofland, 1984, p. 65). It is important for the researcher to engage in the writing of formal field notes on a daily basis – so that he or she does not begin to forget what was observed that day (Goffman, 2002).

For the purposes of this dissertation, I gained entry into five clothing swap parties as a participant-observer through the introduction of the clothing swap party host. The

host was recruited to plan the event, as well as invite 4 – 5 friends to attend the party. Hots were recruited via a snowball sample using contacts within the Greensboro and Winston-Salem, NC areas.

I engaged in participant observation at each swap party. In doing so, I observed how individuals interacted as a group, and how these individuals made decisions about the exchange. While the party was happening I took field jottings, or on-the-spot notes, that I used to quickly record my observations. I then wrote up more detailed, formal fieldnotes that summarized the event in detail after each swap party. The full field notes were written within 24 hours of each swap party's conclusion. Last, I kept a field diary, which included personal notes regarding the research process, as the need arose. In combination, the three types of fieldnotes ensured that my observations, thoughts, and experiences were captured as fully as possible.

Interviews

Although field notes provide a great deal of in-depth data, a researcher often needs more clarity regarding what has been observed. Interviews allow for follow up and are typically used in the field as a means of adding dimension to the data. In this section, I will discuss how I employed the interview method in my study and why.

Interviewing is one of the most frequently used methods of data collection in qualitative research (Merriam, 1998), and particularly when a researcher seeks to understand the social world. Interviews in ethnographic research are generally more familiar, less structured interviews to the extent that the format oftentimes involves conversations and storytelling between participants and the researcher (Merrigan &

Huston, 2004). Essentially, the goal is to make interviewing more informal – as this allows for a more “real” dialog between the participants and the researcher.

In addition, although observation is the most common method within the ethnographic context, there may be factors that cannot be directly observed – such as feelings, thoughts, and intentions. The details that individuals ascribe to the world around them may also be challenging to grasp solely from observation. Thus, the interview helps the researcher to gain deeper insight from the participants (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

There are three types of interviews that a researcher can use. The three types of interviews are: *structured interviews*, *semi-structured interviews*, and *informal interviews*. Structured interviews follow detailed guides and questions to be followed so rigidly that they are often designed as an “oral survey” (Merriam, 1998). Semi-structured and informal interviews take a different approach from structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews include some structured questions but also have less structured questions that make the interview more like a conversation (Merriam, 1998). Informal interviews have little structure and questions often evolve during the interview.

Question development is a critical part of qualitative interviewing. Asking good questions is important. As such, a discussion guide that gives “guidance on what main questions to ask and of whom” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 147) is typically used. The researcher should use the guide for the purpose of leading whatever discussion emerges, while also staying on task with the overall topic (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

According to Merriam (1998), there are four types of questions that an interviewer can ask in order to encourage open and honest responses from participants: *hypothetical questions*, *devil's advocate questions*, *ideal position questions*, and *interpretive questions*. Hypothetical questions ask the participant to assess a hypothetical situation, while ideal questions invite the respondent to think about a situation in an ideal context (Merriam, 1998). Devil's advocate questions require the participant to think about opposing perspectives, and, lastly, interpretive questions allow the participant to react to the researcher's interpretation of what he or she has shared during the interview (Merriam, 1998). The specific question types are illustrated in Figure 5.

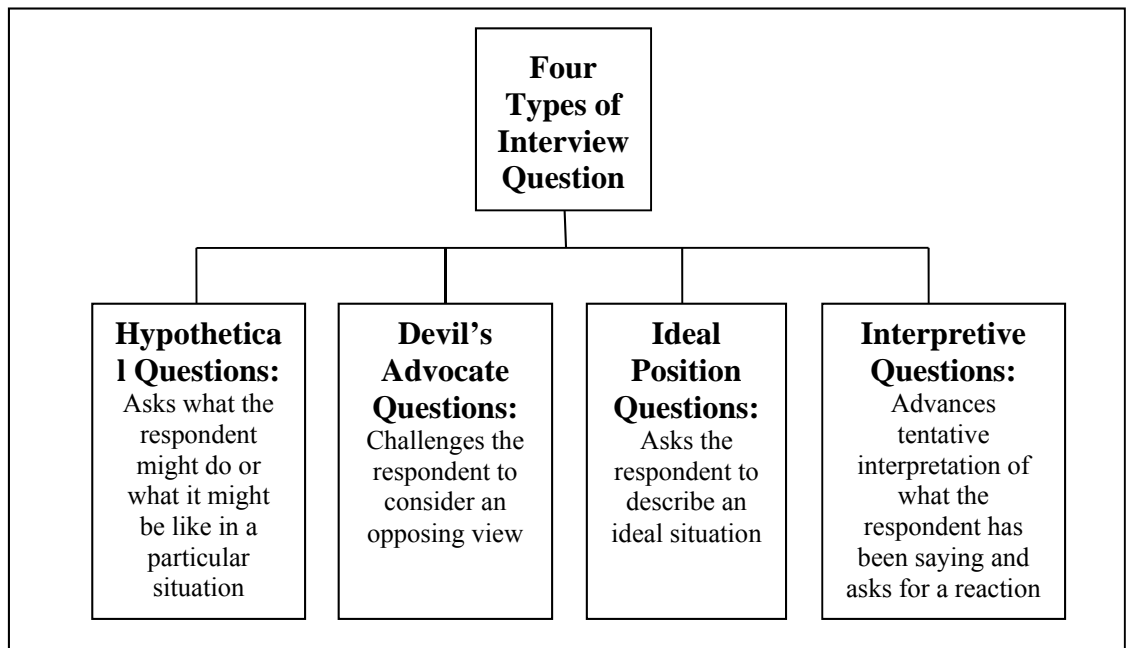


Figure 5. Four Types of Interview Questions.
Adapted from: Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in Education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Adhering to these types of questions can improve the quality of data acquired in an interview, but it is important to also allow for spontaneous conversation which helps the researcher to establish stronger relationships with participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

In this dissertation, I conducted two types of semi-structured interviews. The first type of interview was basically a “closet interview.” The closet interview was conducted with the host of each swap party (five hosts in total), and took place prior to the swap party event. The interviews were audiotaped with participant consent (see Appendix A: Informed Consent). I began the clothing swap party host interview with a discussion of her past experiences with clothing swap parties, and what she hoped to accomplish with her upcoming party (see Appendix B: Interview Schedule). The participant was encouraged to share her likes, dislikes, and concerns regarding the swap process, and was also encouraged to discuss what she envisioned as an ideal experience for the clothing swap party. Next, the host gave a detailed tour of her closet, while making reference to her favorite items and process for choosing the clothing she planned to give away during the clothing swap party. During the closet tour, I asked each to point out certain brands or favorite items. I probed into the why behind her preference for these items and how they relate to her overall style goals.

The second type of interview that I conducted was the post-swap party interview. A total of eleven participants were recruited from the five clothing swap parties. These individuals were selected based on the discussion that occurred during the clothing swap party, such as conversations that involved style and fashion knowledge, brand preferences, shopping behaviors, and fashion tips/suggestions. The interviews began

with an overview of the participant's clothing swap party experience (see Appendix B: Interview Schedule). If it was her first swap experience, I asked her what she liked and disliked about it. If the participant had attended other clothing swap parties in the past, I asked her to draw comparisons between them in terms of her experience. I then asked how she decided on bringing certain items to the party, and what influenced her decisions. I also asked her about her clothing preferences, decision-making, and shopping behavior in general.

A total of sixteen interviews were conducted (five with swap party hosts and eleven with swap party guests). Each in-depth interview lasted between thirty to ninety minutes and allowed me to further dissect the "fashion talk" that occurred during the swap party. Moreover, because participants were of different backgrounds, ethnicities, and ages, I was able to encompass multiple viewpoints on the topic. Table 2 provides details about the participants. All names have been changed for the purposes of confidentiality.

Table 2

Participant Information

| Swap Party | Age | Ethnicity | Occupation | Major |
|----------------------|------------|------------------|----------------------------|---|
| Swap Party #1 | | | | |
| Monica (Host) | 20 | African-American | Student | English/ Consumer, Apparel, & Retail Studies |
| Gena | 19 | African-American | Student | Graphic Design |
| Veronica | 21 | African-American | Student | Biology |
| Swap Party #2 | | | | |
| Marsha (Host) | 26 | Caucasian | Student | Consumer, Apparel, & Retail Studies |
| Mackenzie | 28 | Asian | Student | Consumer, Apparel, & Retail Studies |
| Hannah | 22 | Asian | Student | Consumer, Apparel, & Retail Studies |
| Swap Party #3 | | | | |
| Tamara (Host) | 29 | African-American | Student | M.B.A. |
| Lindsey | 34 | African-American | Accounting | n/a |
| Jasmine | 37 | African-American | Mary Kay Representative | n/a |
| Swap Party #4 | | | | |
| Tonya (Host) | 27 | African-American | Student | Resident |
| Tracey | 29 | African-American | Occupational Therapist | n/a |
| Kenya | 34 | African-American | Assistant Professor | n/a |
| Swap Party #5 | | | | |
| April (Host) | 19 | Caucasian | Student | Graphic Design |
| Jaime | 19 | Asian | Student | Consumer, Apparel, & Retail Studies |
| Chelsea | 19 | Caucasian | Student | Consumer, Apparel, & Retail Studies |
| Kayla | 19 | Caucasian | Student | Undecided |

Netnography

Along with the data collected using more traditional methods of ethnography, I also examined online consumer swap behavior using the method of netnography (Kozinets, 2002). Individuals interested in fashion often gain advice, recommendations and share product knowledge about clothing brands via the Internet. Indeed, fashion blogs and forums have grown exponentially over the past five years. For example, a recent Women's Wear Daily article estimated that, even five years ago, over 2 million fashion and shopping-related blogs existed throughout the World Wide Web (Corcoran, 2006). These blogs are said to impact the fashion world significantly, as blogger's opinions often guide the views of consumers, and, in turn, affect the choices they make regarding clothing brands (Corcoran, 2006).

According to Kozinets (2002), Netnography is defined as "a new qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to study the cultures and communities that are emerging through computer-mediated communications" (p. 62). Consumers are now interacting with World Wide Web pages on a daily basis, and often join online forums and communities to share their ideas and perspectives (Intel, 2010). Thus, given the recent influx of online communities and cultures, netnography takes online culture into account where behaviors and interactions are similar to the "real world."

Kozinets (2010) outlines a set of procedures for conducting netnographic research. Kozinets asserts that the researcher must first identify an online site to investigate (Kozinets, 2010). Once the online community is identified, netnography

follows the practice of a typical ethnography – but in the online community. The researcher can choose to do pure observation or participant observation, and thereafter goes through an iterative interpretation of key findings (Kozinets, 2010). Thus, meaning will evolve from the “text” exchanged within the online community.

In addition to fashion blogs/forums, fashion websites exist where consumers not only exchange advice about clothing and brands, but also exchange clothing. As mentioned in Chapter I, one of the most popular online clothing swap sites that facilitates such exchange is Swapstyle.com. Swapstyle.com was founded by a fashion design student in 2003. The website has grown to include more than just clothing swapping, in that it offers a customer profile section where members can post pictures of outfits and get feedback from other members. The website also includes an open forum section where members can “talk” about various fashion topics.

I observed the activities and behaviors of consumers on Swapstyle.com, as well as four additional popular clothing swap websites: Rehash.com, PoshSwaps.com, Thredup.com, and Iswish.com. Each has a significant online following, and observation of the content posted on these sites allowed for a deeper understanding of swap culture overall. I particularly looked for member posts about apparel preferences, and any instances where brands were discussed. I became a member of each website, which allowed me entrance into the online forums. Over a period of one month, I observed and recorded the interactions between swappers at each site, and captured any “text” that explicitly referred to apparel brands and preferences. I also observed interactions pertaining to group dynamics, including sharing recommendations, advice, and efforts

toward relationship building. Because fashion leaders have the power persuade others to consider new fashions (Workman, 2010), understanding how these groups use the online swap forum is important, as they regularly discuss their preferred fashion brand choices in the blog/website environment. Data collected from these sites took the form of text and photos, and were used to augment the field notes and interviews from the in-person swaps.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

To being the analysis process, field notes were typed and all interviews were transcribed verbatim. Then, the field notes and interview transcripts were examined alongside the website data for meanings that emerged relative to the study objectives (Clifford, 1986). Combined, the data were examined for common patterns and inferences were made. According to Spiggle (1994), there are two essential activities that are involved in the activity of inference: *analysis* and *interpretation*. Analysis involves classifying and describing data through several key operations: *categorization* (classifying and labeling groups of data), *abstraction* (grouping previously categorized data into more general categories), *comparison* (assessing the difference and similarities within the established categories), *dimensionalization* (digging deeper into the specific characteristics and dimension of the categories), *integration* (identifying the relationship between the discovered categories and theoretical frameworks), *iteration* (moving back and forth between various research stages), and *refutation* (empirically examining the established categories and conceptual framework). Interpretation entails making sense of the data that has been analyzed through a transfer of meaning. That is, the researcher

identifies the abstract concepts that emerged from the research, and translates these concepts into more familiar terms (Spiggle, 1994). Thus, the researcher decodes the data in order to draw out the meaning.

I began the analysis by categorizing the data based on common ideas and experiences that emerged. I then compared and contrasted the categories, and looked for common themes to explain the categories I had identified. As a result of the analysis, three conceptual areas were identified and used to structure the interpretation: *The Fashion Leadership Experience*, *Fashion Leaders and Group Membership*, and *The Clothing Exchange Experience*. The first conceptual area discusses the fashion-related behaviors that fashion leaders engage in. The second conceptual area addresses how fashion leaders differentiate themselves from others and reinforce their identities by being a part of a larger group. Last, the third conceptual area sheds light on the clothing swap phenomenon by exploring the various dimensions of the swap as a consumption experience.

One of the most important components of the analysis process is that of integration. Integration involves articulating the relationship between the meanings discovered and the broader theoretical issues guiding the study (Spiggle, 1994). Essentially, this is when connections are made between the research objectives, existing literature and theoretical considerations. For instance, it is evident that certain consumer groups form attachments to brands that they identify with (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Quester et al., 2006; Schau et al., 2009). Consequently, I looked for similarities in the experiences of my participants and observed whether this notion surfaced in the data.

Likewise, at this point I examined the data with respect to more abstract or theoretical issues underpinning the study in order to discuss the broader implications of my findings for the study of brands, swaps, and fashion consumer group membership.

Summary

In this chapter, an explanation of the methodological framework was provided. Methods that were used in data collection were explained, and specific approaches to data analysis and interpretation were described. The next three chapters (Chapters IV – VI), I present the resulting thematic interpretation of data. They are followed by a discussion of the broader significance of the main findings that emerge in the thematic interpretation (Chapter VII).

CHAPTER IV

THE FASHION LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE

As discussed in Chapter II, the literature identifies fashion leaders as a distinct group of individuals. This distinction is based on factors such as shopping behavior, need for information, and level of fashion interest (Kang & Park-Poaps, 2010; Workman & Johnson, 1993). Participants in this study were identified as fashion leaders based on similar fashion-related behaviors (Hirschman & Adcock, 1978).

As will be discussed in this chapter, data indicate that such factors are integral to how participants' see themselves and what is important to them as consumers. Four thematic areas shed light on the participants' experiences as fashion leaders: (1) *Expressing the Individual through the Unique*, (2) *Being In The Know*, (3) *Shopping with a Purpose*, and (4) *Products and Stores*. Issues within each thematic area are discussed relative to the importance of fashion leadership for understanding participants' experiences.

Expressing the Individual through the Unique

According to participants, clothing is more than just what they wear. As a result, they are very intentional about the apparel choices they make, and what these choices communicate about who they are as individuals. For each participant in this study, apparel is a mode of expression that allows her to differentiate herself from others. Participants talked about expressing their uniqueness through distinct kinds of apparel,

whether specific garments or combinations thereof. Four issues surfaced as important to understanding how they use clothing this way: (a) *Apparel as an Expression of Self*, (b) *Avoiding Copycats*, (c) *Vintage/Thrift/Consignment Stores*, and (d) *A Community of Leaders*. Each of these issues will be discussed in the following sections.

Apparel as an Expression of Self

Participants place a great deal of importance on their individuality, and talked a lot about how their apparel choices are deliberately used to communicate distinctive personality traits and characteristics to others. As Monica explains, her apparel choices essentially represent her personality.

M: ... It [apparel] represents my personality. I am pretty unique – I'd like to think. I call myself strange, but I don't think it's strange. I think it's just unique. I like rock... and then I like R&B... and then I like war movies. But, I also like sappy love movies. So, just a real mix in my personality... and I like to reflect that in my clothing.

One item that Monica shared as representing her personality was a recently purchased pair of Steve Madden sandals (see Figure 6). Monica purchased these shoes during a recent Spring Break trip to Miami and was excited about wearing them. She stated that these were currently her favorite shoes because they fit with her eccentric personality and taste. While Monica and I discussed her shoes, her roommate Shayla joined in on the discussion. Shayla joked that upon seeing the shoes during the Miami shopping trip, she immediately knew the shoes were “Monica shoes,” as only Monica would be able to pull-off the style. Clearly, Shayla's comment indicates that even Monica's peers recognize how her individuality is represented through her apparel choices.



Figure 6. Monica's Steve Madden sandals from her Miami Spring Break trip

Monica is not alone, as most participants talked about how expression through clothing marks them as individuals and helps them to define the self as unique. For Jaime, the belief that her clothing defines her is so strong that it impacts her rules about friends borrowing her clothes:

J: I know when like friends want to borrow my clothes... there's always certain pieces that I don't want them to wear. Like, I'm not trying to be mean – but I just like wolves so you can't wear any of my wolves stuff. But, all the other stuff anyone can borrow, but just certain pieces, I feel, define me... 'cause I feel like no one else has them.

Jaime clearly sees a connection between her clothes as a means for expressing herself and who she is as an individual. She views her wolf themed garments as special because she directly links them to a sense of pride in her own uniqueness. Thus, someone else wearing the garments would, in turn, damage the image of the unique self she seeks to

project to others.

In a similar vein, Marsha perceives her clothing as an instrument for expressing characteristics of herself. For instance, she discusses how her closet and the clothing she has collected represents her personality and fashion orientation as a whole:

MA: Anyone that really knows me knows that I really love to shop. And, that clothes and accessories and shoes are kind of like my thing. So, when I think of my closet – I’m prideful!... It does relate to me because I carefully select items. Or, at least I try to carefully select items that fit me. It fits my personality, fits what’s in style...all that kind of stuff. I put a lot of effort into finding the right things so, this is sort of a collection of me finding the right things.

Marsha’s clothing choices are a compilation of what her personality and style embody.

Fashion is her “thing,” and her collection of clothing uniquely expresses that.

I observed that the desire for apparel that can be used to express the self was a common motivation for swapping. That is, during the clothing swap parties, participants showed greater interest in items they felt were distinctive, such that they could be used to express their individual style. For example, at one swap party one of the guests, Mackenzie, brought a large number of items from her home country of Thailand. Included were five different pairs of shoes that immediately caught the interest of other guests. In fact, as Mackenzie was pulling the shoes out of her bag and setting them up for display, “Oohs” and “Ahs” were heard from everyone. Many immediately wanted to know what sizes the shoes were, in an effort to gauge whether or not they would be able to wear them. Participants talked about how Mackenzie’s shoes were interesting since they originated from Thailand, which, of course, made them more unique. Once the

swapping began, one pair of shoes in particular received a great deal of attention (see Figure 7). Many participants tried on the shoes, some knowing that they would be too small. Ultimately, the only person who was able to fit in the shoes was Marsha, and she commented on how she felt these shoes were one-of-a-kind. In addition, Marsha stated that she especially liked them because she thought they matched her bubbly and fun personality.



Figure 7. Marsha modeling the shoes she received from Mackenzie during the swap

Essentially, Mackenzie's shoes garnered a lot of attention because of the uniqueness of their origin. No one else could have them. Thus, the likelihood that Marsha would see someone else with her newly acquired shoes was doubtful, which made the shoes even more attractive to her.

Avoiding Copy-Cats

Participants put a lot of effort into making the right apparel choices, and specifically choices that allowed them to express themselves through dress. They value diversity in their apparel choices, as well as how they are able to create individualized looks through their clothes. Because they put so much effort into creating these unique looks, it is especially disappointing to participants when they run into “copy-cats.” According to participants, a copy-cat is someone who is wearing the same thing that they are at the same time. Jasmine explains the concept and describes the measures she takes to avoid the possibility that someone will wear the same outfit as her:

JS: I don't like the idea of maybe walking into somewhere and maybe somebody has on my outfit. I like being an individual... so, I try not to go to the mall very often. I try to find smaller boutiques in the area.

For Jasmine, shopping strategically can help her avoid commonplace outfits, which she avoids because she views herself as an individual. Thus, setting herself apart from others is important, and shopping at small boutiques gives her access to items that are more exclusive and therefore less common.

Lindsey also discusses how the practice of shopping at boutiques helps her to avoid “copy-cats.”

L: They [boutiques] only have like one small, one medium, and one large. Now, I have seen where they go back and re-stock them again, but for the most part it's not gonna be like Forever 21 when everyone is walking around with your top, so... it is more exclusive.

The fact that there is a narrower selection of merchandise available in boutiques gives Lindsey the confidence that she will not see an outfit that she purchased on someone else at the same time. Boutiques offer her the benefit of exclusivity, which prompts her to shop this kind of venue over others. By wearing items that are more selective, she communicates to others her distinctiveness, thereby outwardly displaying her individuality through her clothing.

Similarly, Jaime directly associates boutiques with uniqueness. She refers to boutiques as “secret places,” as she feels they offer an advantage over other retailers. Jaime explains,

J: I actually go to boutiques to buy stuff that’s like unique that no one has. ‘Cause I hate having something that someone else has... Yeah, I just don’t like it! I don’t go to the trendy stores... I go to like the unique secret places.

Shopping from these secret places helps Jaime to avoid copy-cats, of whom she is passionately critical. Boutiques give her access to distinctive clothing that supports her in cultivating a unique self-image by minimizing the chance that others will be wearing the same item.

Based on participants’ responses, it is apparent that as fashion leaders, they have specific consumption behaviors that aid them in maintaining their individuality. Many seek to mitigate the risk of encountering a “twin” by shopping for one-of-a-kind items at stores that carry a smaller selection of items. Nevertheless, copy-cat instances can still happen, and can lead to disappointment. As Jaime expresses, “It’s just like, darn... I don’t have a cool shirt anymore. She has it too!” For Jaime, her identity as a fashion

leader is compromised when an apparel choice is not unique. She conveys her fashion leadership to others through her clothing, therefore, when someone else has the same item she does, she is no longer seen as a unique individual. She views the item as commonplace and less exclusive, and consequently, less desirable.

Vintage/Thrift/Consignment Stores

The need to be distinctive relative to others was also seen in the participants' overwhelming preference for buying things from one-of-a-kind places such as consignment, thrift, and vintage clothing stores. Such stores often provide participants the opportunity to find unique, uncommon, and perhaps even valuable items. In addition, the risk of purchasing "copy-cat" items is diminished, given the rarity of the items that such stores sell. Thus, these stores help participants' to express their individuality through clothing. Yet, the shopping experience itself also proves to be distinctive and further speaks to participants' overall desire to be different. Monica describes the benefits of her "thrifting":

M: It's better than actually shopping because it's more of a project or an experience. If you go to Forever 21, you know you're going to find something cool. But, if you go to a thrift store – you kind of have to look through the rubbish to find something cool. And, I like that... it makes shopping feel like more of an accomplishment. That's why me and all my friends go thrifting... it's just more interesting.

I: Do you feel like there's a difference in what you find at Forever 21 versus thrifting in terms of the type of clothing?

M: Ohhhh yeah! Yeah! Well, really in a thrift store it will be more authentic vintage clothing... so, I like that because it is kind of cool to say "I have this and it came from such and such [store]."

Monica likens the thrifting experience to a treasure hunt, explaining that, “A lot of stuff in the thrift store is not cute!... That’s why it’s like a treasure hunt because you might not find anything, but you might... and when you find it – it’s guaranteed to be really cool.”

Describing her thrift store shopping process in more detail, Monica goes on to state:

M: Sometimes I will look for the ugliest thing I can find or the weirdest that I just don’t understand – and I try it on. Cause I’ve gotten some cool stuff that way... I remember this [referring to her thrift store purchase]. It’s really just a cover-up, but I didn’t know what it was at first. It was just hanging quite weird... and I was like “What is it – it looks so ugly.” I tried it on and I liked it... so I bought it. So, that’s just one way that I get things that I really, really like.

For Monica, both the thrift store shopping experience and the merchandise she finds there reinforce her identity as a fashion leader, by providing her with unique items and a unique shopping experience. This combination allows her to set herself apart from others who are not privy to the thrifting experience.

Participants identified similar benefits of shopping in consignment or thrift/vintage type stores. Such stores can give the consumer access to brands that might ordinarily be out of reach due to price. For example, April was able to purchase a brand of jeans at a consignment store that would normally cost too much at a regular retail store:

A: I’ve got a pair of Current Elliots. I found them at a consignment store and they’re my favorite pair of jeans... but I would never be able to buy them full price because they are so expensive.

April goes on to further explain the benefits of shopping at a consignment store:

A: ...A lot of their clothes are pricier – but because they’re being consigned... they’re a lot cheaper. Like originally, they were more expensive. A lot of them still have their original tags.

April is able to try brands and merchandise that would normally be outside of her consideration set because, in the consignment store setting, price is no longer a barrier. Participants like April talked about such shopping experiences with excitement. Kenya, who also shops consignment and thrift stores, looks for similarly good deals on expensive brands:

K: Like, if I go to a place like Plato’s Closet or a thrift store... I’ll be intrigued that something came from somewhere – like a name brand. I’ll be like, ohhhhhh okay! You know, this means that it might be worth more than it might be priced.

Finding a more “exclusive” item in a consignment or thrift store makes that item even more appealing, in as much as it adds to one’s distinctiveness.

Clothing swap websites recognize the appeal for more distinctive items, as a few of them have started to feature vintage merchandise. In particular, Posh Swaps has taken this approach, as they specifically refer to vintage clothing in their “About Us” section.

Posh Swaps describes itself in the following manner:

Posh Swaps is a place to swap, buy and sell second hand, vintage and recycled, restyled, reworked clothes, shoes and accessories both designer and high street and for men, women and children. We hope that you like what you see.

Posh Swaps offers their members the option of specifically viewing vintage items, as there is a tab labeled “vintage” within their swapping website where merchandise specifications and pictures are listed. Oftentimes, the members who list vintage merchandise give extensive details about each item and its origin, such as Bianca’s listing of her vintage earring holder from the 1980’s (see Figure 8):

B: I got this since I was a child and still not sure if I want it to go. The mirror is in excellent condition. I just need to clean it before sending. Earrings not included. This item is in Brazil.

Posh Swap’s merchandise, like Bianca’s vintage item, caters to swappers who desire merchandise that is more rare. That is, offering vintage items through the site provides members with more exclusive options, and may appeal to fashion leaders who are looking for one-of-a-kinds to aid them in further promoting their unique selves.



Figure 8. Bianca’s vintage earring holder from the 80’s

A Community of Leaders

Consignment, thrift, and/or vintage store experiences were mentioned often by participants. Moreover, they acknowledged a tacit agreement about the value of the unique offerings provided by such stores among other fashion leaders. For example, Monica cites comments she received on a vest she purchased at a thrift store (see Figures 9 and 10), from others who are part of the “thrift community”:

M: A lot of people were like “Cool, I love that vest... It’s really cool.” And it’s cool because whenever you wear weird stuff like this – most of the time it’s only thrifters who recognize it. They really understand how beautiful it really is... so it’s kind of like a community of thrifters.



Figure 9. Monica's vest from a thrift store (front view)



Figure 10. Monica's vest from a thrift store (back view)

The “thrifting community” is not only prevalent among fashion leaders that swap clothing in-person, but it is also present among on-line swappers. For example, from my observations of online swap websites, I found that members will go on weekend thrifting excursions, and then report their “finds” to the other online members. This emerged in a conversation shared among members of Rehash.com:

E: What was everyone's Thrift Store finds for this weekend?

EM: I went to Goodwill with one of our fellow Rehashers, and I got: BNWT [brand new with tags] VS [Victoria's Secret] lace push up bra \$1, VS Push up bra \$1, Aerie Tshirt bra, looks BN [brand new], \$1, VS Sweatshirt, looks BN [brand

new], \$2.50, 2 nice shirts, both \$2.50 Thrift Store: VS Shirt \$3, Chinese Laundry wedges \$11, 2 HCO shorts both \$9.

C: I got 3 pairs of Ann Taylor Loft pants (one BNWT) for a total of \$24 at our Salvation Army Select store. I love this store. They stock it with their nicest brands. You pay more but it's a very nice boutique like shop so the experience is great. And there are frequently sales - I got a very nice button up shirt for \$2.50 as well!

It is evident from dialogue between the “Rehashers” that they share a commitment to the treasure hunt aspect of thrift store shopping. Through their thrift and consignment store finds, they have access to new and different items, as well as brands that would normally be priced much higher. It is interesting to note that, as seen in the above excerpt, this community has even developed its own terms for communicating finds with each other. For instance, acronyms such as “BNWT,” “BN,” and “VS” are used to describe the details of the finds and further point to the ways that thrifters see themselves as a community of consumers.

For participants, the notion of a community of like-minded fashion leaders extends to other kinds of venues that offer one-of-a kind garments, such as Etsy. Etsy is an online marketplace that primarily focuses on handmade and vintage merchandise. The website is also rooted in the small business concept as seen from the company's mission statement:

Our mission is to empower people to change the way the global economy works. We see a world in which very-very small businesses have much-much more sway in shaping the economy, local living economies are thriving everywhere, and people value authorship and provenance as much as price and convenience. We are bringing heart to commerce and making the world more fair, more sustainable, and more fun.

From the company's perspective, the website allows members to connect and exchange with one another in a unique way, as consumers get to form relationships with the actual producers of the items. Given Etsy's positioning, the website in particular is viewed as personal and intimate, and yet is a fairly large online marketplace. April discusses this notion:

I: What is it about Etsy that seems appealing to you?

A: Um, it's kind of like – I know this is probably going to sound cheesy, but I feel like it's like going to the farmer's market... And I like supporting local farmers – except for these people don't have... well, I guess some of them might have their own stores – but most of these people are making these pieces out of their homes and they're really affordable.

I: So, how is shopping on Etsy different than any other venue?

A: I guess Etsy – it's kind of like Ebay. So, you're dealing directly with the seller... whereas if you're shopping online from a big store... it's not as personal. Like I've gotten little letters in my packages like... "Thank you so much – here's a coupon." Like "Shop in my store again."

April's description of Etsy as a "farmer's market" positions it much like a local gathering place where people go to find unique and handmade items as part of an overall consumption "experience." The personal communication she received directly from the seller makes the interaction more intimate and authentic, while making her feel like she is a valued member of a group. In other words, the personalized service and handmade objects help her to feel special.

During a conversation before her clothing swap party, April discussed what draws her to Etsy. She feels that the items featured on Etsy have a unique flair to them, since crafters are creating them. Given her in-depth fashion interest, she mentioned that she often browses Etsy to see what new and different items were being sold. She came across an earring/cuff from Etsy during one of these recent routine browsings (see Figure 11), and felt it was a good purchase given the distinctiveness of the item and the reasonable price (\$7.00). Her fashion leader peers also confirmed her choice, as she mentioned getting compliments from others who told her that the item was cool. Thus, April's patronage of Etsy not only makes her feel special given the unique type of shopping experience it affords, but it also reinforces her role as a fashion leader, given the unusual merchandise it offers.



Figure 11. April's earring/cuff from Etsy

Participants' responses highlight a shared desire to distinguish their individuality and uniqueness through clothing, including both the objects themselves and the shopping experience. Ultimately, the more this uniqueness is recognized, the more their identity as fashion leaders is confirmed. Yet, being a fashion leader appears to be more than just about being able to find a particular garment or store. It takes a great deal of effort to know what works and what does not. In other words, to know what a unique style is. Thus, all participants talked about spending time staying connected to a wide range of fashion information sources.

Being In The Know

Participants place a great deal of importance on being knowledgeable of all aspects of fashion. To this end, they stay closely connected to a variety of resources that help them keep pace with current trends. Being well informed helps participants to make the style choices that allow them to be different. Interestingly, this constant trend

research is not seen as a chore by participants. Instead, it is something that comes naturally to them, as they are compelled to do it. As Marsha explains:

MA: You know, we all get really excited about clothes. It's a part of our lives... it's a lifestyle. Um, so we know what brands are out there. We know what's in style. So, we're still really trendy... I guess I could say trend is a part of what we do. It's a part of our lifestyle... Yeah, we get magazines. We frequently look online to find what's in style. We talk about styles. Um, we always compliment each other when we see something that is really stylish or that we like. And so, it's just a part of who we are.

It is almost as though Marsha describes the need for being in the know as a part of a fashion leader's DNA. Being aware of trends and investigating media sources is directly tied to participants' identities as fashion leaders. As fashion leaders, such behaviors are integral to who they are as consumers, and, conversely, are an integral part of the experience of being a fashion leader.

As Veronica describes, there are a variety of resources that participants access in order to get fashion information.

V: I read blogs... I like entertainment news. I look at celebrities. I like magazines. I go to the bookstore and read magazines, and look at the style guides. I am really into that!

Each type of reference provides participants with specific benefits and particular kinds of information. For example, April explains how she uses different print magazines to keep up with style changes:

A: I subscribe to *Nylon* magazine... and I really like that magazine a lot. I buy other magazines too... and I like that... using that.

I: What other magazines do you buy?

A: Um, sometimes I buy *Glamour*, *Marie-Claire*... and then my roommate gets *Vogue* and I like to go through her's too.

I: And what sort of benefit are you getting when you go through these magazines?

A: Just seeing what's trendy from month to month... and seeing how much has changed in just so little time. Only in like 30 days. Like colors for each month... things like that – jewelry.

April uses magazines to follow trends, and her ability to follow these trends informs the decisions she makes about purchases. To maintain her identity as a fashion leader, she uses those resources as a “blueprint” for her own buying decisions. Similarly, Jasmine points to this blueprint notion when she discusses how she relies on fashion magazines for advice and ideas.

JS: I read *InStyle* and *Lucky* magazine. Like, those are my two favorites.

I: What makes those your two favorites?

JS: *InStyle* – I love it because it's like a one-stop shop. Like, you can... everything is in there. It talks about trends in beauty and it has your sections of what's out now and at different price categories – and it goes all the way from low end pricing to very high end pricing. So, even if I might not be able to get it – I can at least dream [laughter]... and I can recreate the look for less. And that's why I like *Lucky* – because *Lucky* is good at helping you recreate the look for less. So, I kind of couple the two... I look at *InStyle* for like maybe the higher end items – but then I look at *Lucky* to see what they're doing to recreate that look.

For Jasmine, these fashion magazines serve as handbooks that allow her to stay on top of trends and to translate them in terms of her budget. With the help of these magazines, she can create her wardrobe piece by piece and define the trends in her own way.

Resources participants use to keep up with what is current are not limited to magazines. Media and celebrities also seem to be an important source for participants, even though they might not be directly linked to fashion trends. As Tracy explains,

T: It's more like celebrity things like Media Takeout or even Essence Online... or like TMZ. Yeah, just kind of observing celebrities and things that may not [be] necessarily geared towards style, but still I can make those observations.

Although such sources are not specifically about fashion trends, Tracy can still get ideas and then considers how they can be implemented as a part of her own style. For participants, many of whom follow music and lifestyle news, celebrities provide inspiration in terms of style, as well as shared knowledge of what is popular at the moment.

On occasion, I observed that certain celebrities and their styles were brought up during the clothing swap parties. Participants seemed to think that these individuals had an aspirational style, one that swappers wanted to achieve. For example, during one swap party the discussion turned to Solange Knowles. Solange Knowles was recently featured wearing a turban during a red carpet event. Swapper Kenya had chosen a turban during the swap and was excited about her new item. However, she had reservations about how to wear the turban. During this discussion, another participant described Solange as “rocking” the accessory. Other participants chimed in, stating that they

remembered seeing a picture of Solange in her turban on various websites. They mentioned how Solange managed to “dress-up” the accessory for her event, but that the turban was versatile enough to also be worn in a “dress-down,” casual manner. The idea of Solange wearing the look gave the turban instant appeal, and seemed to make Kenya feel more assured about wearing the turban in the near future. Solange Knowles and her unique look served as an inspiration to Kenya, and made her more aware of how she might incorporate the trendy accessory. By doing so, she can, in turn, promote her position as a fashion leader.

As evidenced in the participants’ responses, being in the know about fashion is important to their experience as fashion leaders. That is, their fashion knowledge gives them credibility among their peers, and solidifies their identity as fashion leaders. However, simply knowing about fashion trends does not necessarily make someone a fashion leader. That is, individuals have to be able to act on this knowledge and to translate it into specific buying decisions.

Shopping With a Purpose

Each participant talked about following a particular process when shopping for clothing. In most cases, the shopping process is described as very purposeful – even when a particular purchase is not planned. Tamara explains this,

TM: Sometimes it’s just, let me go to the mall and see what I can find... sometimes it relaxes me as well – and I may just wanna go in and look and not buy anything.

Although Tamara is not necessarily going to the mall to buy anything, shopping still has a purpose, in that she is looking for a means of relaxation. Other participants also mentioned shopping without a distinct purchasing strategy. Monica describes how she approaches shopping:

M: I rarely ever go to a store with a plan about what I am going to buy... because shopping really is like a fun experience. So, I just go expecting something cool... and then when I do have a plan – I end up not getting that. I always end up getting something else that I saw that was cool anyway. So, that's why most of the time I don't have a plan.

Monica's description of shopping highlights how, for her, it is more about the experience than the buying of something she planned ahead of time. Going in with a plan would therefore defeat the purpose of shopping for her.

Other participants, however, have specific goals regarding purchases when they go shopping. More often than not, these participants say that when a plan is included in their shopping process, they are shopping for a specific want, need or occasion. April describes how she proceeds in this way when shopping:

A: Um, I usually make a list of things I want... and then I'll go online and look at stores that I know... like where I am going in the mall and see if they have what I am looking for.

April has an organized way of keeping track of her wants. She relies on a combination of online and brick and mortar stores to search out and find the items. In other words she collects the information online first, so that she knows what stores to visit once she heads to the mall.

Similarly, Lindsey also employs a plan, but the plan is always contingent upon a specific type of need:

L: Most of the time when I go shopping, I kinda go with a mindset for what I'm looking for... usually I will go for a specific need. Like if I'm looking for work clothes at that time – then I'll go looking for work clothes. If I'm looking for gym clothes – I try to go looking for gym clothes.

Lindsey's goal is to stay focused on shopping for clothes that fall into the specific category she needs at that particular time. That is, Lindsey tries to keep her focus on the particular need that prompted the shopping process. Similarly, Jasmine uses an occasion-specific approach in her shopping process:

JS: My shopping style is, I am looking for something in particular. I don't just go walking around the mall (laughter)... if I have a certain occasion that's coming up for anything – that's how I shop. So if it's my birthday... I'm more shopping for my birthday outfit and that's it. I may see a couple of things while out – but I'm specifically looking for my birthday outfit and that's it.

Jasmine is extremely focused and does not stray from her purpose when shopping. Thus, if something catches her attention but it does not align with her reason for that particular shopping occasion, she will ignore it.

Kenya is also somewhat rigid about her approach to shopping. However, Kenya's rigidness applies to the limitations of what she is willing to spend for clothing. Given her belief that extensive amounts of money should not be spent on clothing, she is very purposeful about only shopping thrift and second-hand type stores. Kenya explains:

K: ... I don't believe in spending a lot of money [on clothing]. Like, when my friends and I talk about we're going on a shopping spree, we're talking about a

Plato's Closet, Goodwill, thrift store, Megathrift shopping spree. Where you can come out with like twenty items, but you're only paying like \$6.

Kenya's purpose is maintaining her budget when shopping, which impacts her overall preference for where to shop. Second-hand and thrift venues align with her purpose, so she is a frequent patron of these types of stores.

Jennifer, a member of Swapstyle.com, discusses how second-hand stores also align with her shopping purpose, however in a slightly different way than Kenya. For Jennifer, second-hand stores help her to achieve the goal of finding something unique. As she explains,

J: I have to admit, I'm a little obsessed with second-hand stores and consignment/vintage and so on. It's so much more fun to find some wild outfit than the same old thing everyone buys new...plus some of the shoulder pad outfits from the 80's are hilarious.

Although participants shared diverse reasons for shopping and some were clearly more goal-directed than others, they each approached shopping with a specific purpose in mind. This purpose-driven approach to shopping could be linked to their identities as fashion leaders. That is, because they know that the apparel choices they make impact how others will see them, participants spend a good deal of time either going shopping or thinking about and/or preparing for shopping.

Products and Stores

Participants talked a great deal about specific fashion products, whether apparel, accessories, shoes, jewelry, etc., and what those products mean. Clearly the products

they choose are integral to and reflections of their identities as fashion leaders.

Oftentimes, participants also pointed to specific retailers that hold certain meanings for them based on the type of products the store offers. Participants talked about these retailers in terms of what each had to offer, or the main selling point of the store's merchandise. These distinctions can be organized as (a) *style-driven*, (b) *trend-driven*, and (c) *price-driven*. As will be discussed in the following sections, one of the three distinctions takes precedence depending on the participant's particular goals for acquiring a garment.

Style-Driven

Style is a critical factor in the fashion leadership experience. All participants described themselves as fashion forward, and talked about how their styles are designed to be both versatile and unexpected. That is, participants do not want to be confined to a monolithic or mainstream notion of style. For example, as Monica explains, "I don't know if there's one word... I have so many multiple styles... because in different seasons I am into different styles." For Monica, versatility and diversity are key and she does not want to be confined to one way of dressing.

Among participants, the retailer that most aligned with this notion of style diversity was Urban Outfitters, in that they associate it with merchandise that satisfies the ever-changing needs of fashion leaders. As Mackenzie explains, "Urban Outfitters... sometimes you just go there to check out what is new... because they are kind of trendy... they are kind of vintage... they are kind of like a little odd." In keeping with participants' emphasis on uniqueness and individuality, Mackenzie describes Urban

Outfitters as being somewhat unusual. In fact, she visits the store often for the sole purpose of seeing the new styles because she knows they will be extremely varied and slightly eccentric.

Lindsey assigns a similar meaning to Urban Outfitters' products. Yet she does not shop there as often as she shops at other stores because of its higher prices.

L: I like their [Urban Outfitters] style... I think it's their style that is the most thing that appeals to me. Um, I do feel like they are a little on the pricey side though. So, unless I see something... and I absolutely love it, then I'll buy it from there.

Although the unique style of Urban Outfitters is appealing to Lindsey as a fashion leader, the expensive prices sometimes get in the way of making a purchase. April describes a similar experience with this retailer, so she focuses on their sale items:

A: I really do like that store [Urban Outfitters]. Um, I like their sale section because typically their clothes are pretty expensive. But if I can find like some shirts or dresses on sale – then, that's really good. I like their style a lot... kinda hip.

Participants like April and Lindsey recognize that distinctive style comes with a price. As such, they are willing to pay a higher price for something they really want if it will help them have the style “edge” important to maintaining their identity as fashion leaders.

Trend-Driven

As discussed earlier, it is very important for participants to stay connected to current trends. As such, they all talked about two retailers that they consistently look to for trend-driven merchandise: Forever 21 and H&M. Indeed, whenever participants

discussed these two retailers, the word “trendy” nearly always surfaced. For example, Mackenzie states, “I think their designs are pretty trendy... because they have so many different styles.” Yet, participants pointed out that even though they could find something trendy, at either store they could also find something unique. April explains, “I still feel like you can find unique things at big stores like H&M. I feel like I can find something that my friends don’t have.”

Because both retailers were associated with trends, participants often referred to them as their first stop when looking for a particular item. For example, Veronica expresses a strong preference for Forever 21, “Forever 21 is really big for me! I really love it there! I mean, I am addicted! That’s the first place I go to in the mall...I look for Forever 21 all the time.” For Veronica, Forever 21 takes precedence over any other retailer.

A preference for Forever 21 was also brought to light during the clothing swap parties that I observed. That is, as participants displayed their garments prior to swapping there were usually a number of items from Forever 21, and in some cases, every single guest brought at least one Forever 21 item to be swapped. During one of the parties, April, who was familiar with one garment’s Forever 21 origin, remembered seeing it in the store. When it was displayed she remarked that she had considered purchasing it from the store. Consequently, April ended up choosing this item during the exchange (see Figure 12).



Figure 12. April displaying the Forever 21 tank she had recently seen at the store

Although participants identified both H&M and Forever 21 as key sources for trend-driven options, they also highlighted some distinct differences between the two. For instance, participants see a marked difference between them in terms of quality. Forever 21 was repeatedly referred to as being of lesser quality, as evidenced in the following statement made by Monica, “Well, Forever 21 is really nice, but the quality is not all that. So, sometimes I will go to H&M.” Monica sees the trend value of both stores, but associates a higher level of quality with H&M. However, for some, the lack of quality offered by Forever 21’s merchandise is not an issue. As Marsha states, “We know that Forever 21 is cheap, but we still have brand value for it.” Marsha’s statement points to the idea that even though it is not high quality, Forever 21 is a significant source

of trend-driven options. In fact, it could be argued that because Forever 21 is so trend-driven, the participants tend to overlook its lack of quality. As Chelsea explains, “I guess they’re all trends... and so, you don’t need them to last that long. ‘Cause, like, by the time the clothes fall apart – so will that trend.” That is, the high trend factor of Forever 21 trumps the issue of quality.

Another term that surfaced frequently when participants discussed Forever 21 is that of “choice.” They view Forever 21 as a retailer that has a plethora of options, which allows them to experiment with various trends in many different ways. Veronica explains this notion of choice as it applies to Forever 21, “So many choices. I just love it... you can dress any way. You can be any style. Any person with any different style could shop there, I feel like.” For Veronica, the variety of choices that Forever 21 provides helps consumers develop versatile styles. These choices also allow fashion leaders in particular to explore various trends in ways that permit them to express their uniqueness. April highlights the importance of this when discussing the numerous choices afforded to her by the store, “I like Forever 21 because Forever 21 has everything! They have, like, every style you can imagine. Like, you can go in there really open-minded and just find whatever you want!”

Although the surplus of styles is the most important aspect of Forever 21, it is important to note that participants view this choice as a benefit because of their ability to put the items together the “right way.” That is, as fashion leaders, participants use the range of styles offered at Forever 21 to form ensembles that they put together themselves, and therefore use the trends in ways that are their own. This approach is further exhibited

through a discussion between two participants, Jaime and Kayla, regarding Forever 21:

J: It depends on how you put the outfit together and, like, piece it up and make it your own style.

K: I think it just depends on, like, what your style is too... cause like sometimes I go into Forever 21 and I'm, like, who would ever wear this? But, if you put it together the right way you're like, It looks good like that...

Jaime and Kayla bring up an interesting point, in that participants who are fashion leaders shop at Forever 21, even though they know that it is widely accessible to anyone, because they can take the trendy items and turn them into something unique. In other words, they avoid having their complete looks copied because they know how to mix and match items drawn from Forever 21's surplus of choices.

There was also indication that participants see H&M and Forever 21 as slightly different in terms of target age groups. That is, H&M is perceived to target a more mature, yet hip consumer group, while Forever 21 is viewed as primarily "junior aged."

Marsha (age 25) further explains the difference:

MA: H&M is like... you know, more my age group now. You know, it's like a lot more blazers and more professional wear. Moreso H&M speaks to me a little more than Forever 21 probably because their design is a little more targeted towards my age group... but it's also stylish too.

This difference in target market sometimes proves to be frustrating for those more mature participants who are seeking the latest trends. This frustration was especially true since they once shopped at Forever 21, but now feel that they no longer belong. As Tamara

(age 29) explains, “I do [shop] some at Forever 21, but honestly I feel like I’ve outgrown it... ‘cause when I’m in there I feel like I’m the oldest person – and I’m not that old (laughter)!” It is clear that although both retailers are central to participants’ experiences as fashion leaders, there are subtle differences between the two that are obvious to those, like them, who are “in the know.”

Price-Driven

Because most of the participants are students, price is often a factor that affected their decision-making process when shopping for apparel. Although Forever 21 was often cited for its reasonable or inexpensive prices, another type of retailer was also frequently mentioned: the discount or off-price retailer. In particular, participants commonly brought up T.J. Maxx, Marshall’s, and Ross. According to Tamara, these retailers clearly have a distinct place in the fashion leadership experience – as they provide the benefit of bargains to fashion leaders, “[I shop at] T.J. Maxx and Marshall’s... you always find good deals in there.” She goes on to explain how she has even found department store items at a much better price, “... And then sometimes I go in there [T.J. Maxx] and you can see – well, I’ve seen the same items from Belk at T.J. Maxx... of course, at a lower discounted price.” For Tamara, shopping at T.J. Maxx is appealing because the same items that are currently being sold at department stores are accessible to her at a much more reasonable price, which sweetens the deal for her.

Although discounted or off-price retailers surfaced as important to participants, there were other instances where they chose to purchase items from higher priced retailers. In most cases, this was because of their associations of these retailers with

classic or staple items. That is, participants could justify spending more because such items were of higher quality and, therefore, last longer. As Lindsey puts it, “I like classic pieces... a lot of my classic clothes are like 10 years old... but I like classic pieces.” The two retailers that were most commonly cited by participants as possessing this classic/staple association were J. Crew and Banana Republic. For most, the benefits of the classic pieces outweigh the cost, and especially if the item is for work, as in Lindsey’s case, “As far as work clothes, I tend to shop at Banana Republic. They are a little on the pricey side – but if I can find a good sale or something like that [I will shop there].”

Participants viewed the higher price as acceptable because of the type of merchandise these retailers sell. Yet, they were also more open to the idea of seeing someone else in the same outfit (copy-cat) because of the classic orientation of the styles. For example, Jaime very much sees herself as a fashion leader, yet states, “J. Crew has a lot of staple things. Like cardigans and like... stuff that I wouldn’t mind seeing other people wear, you know?” It is somewhat surprising to hear this from a participant, but because an item like a classic cardigan is a staple, it would be hard not to see something like it on someone else. It may also be the case that participants’ view of J. Crew and Banana Republic as upscale retailers justifies the adoption of such items by others.

A related notion is that of the confirmation provided by brand. That is, the store or product brand signifies particular meanings about its value. As Hannah explains, “I think brand is performing as a kind of credible source... it justifies the price or quality.” Although participants prefer finding unique items at good prices, they also acknowledge the need for more “common” styles for which they will pay more if the quality matches

the price.

Summary

Participants are clearly committed to maintaining their identities as fashion leaders and to the overall fashion leadership experience. They value their fashion-related knowledge and skills and spend a great deal of time maintaining them. They see themselves as unique and actively seek to distinguish themselves from others through fashion. However, it should be noted that when considered as part of a larger whole, the fashion leader has more in common with other fashion leaders than not. Such commonalities constitute a group, and one for which membership creates certain expectations and shared behaviors. Such issues are examined in-depth in the next chapter.

CHAPTER V

FASHION LEADERS AND GROUP MEMBERSHIP

Being a fashion leader, while requiring a great deal of independent judgment, also means being a member of a group (Hirschman & Adcock, 1978). Through identification, fashion leaders categorize themselves as different from others through the extent to which they are in fashion (or before fashion). Fashion leadership allows individuals to differentiate themselves from non-fashion leaders through the group's characteristics and norms (Workman & Kidd, 2000). Indeed, the data reveal that there are attributes and behaviors that participants engage in to establish and maintain membership in the fashion leadership group. Similarities regarding group membership that emerged among participants' responses and online observation data are organized through the three thematic areas discussed in this chapter: (1) *Embodying Trends*, (2) *Sharing Styles*, and (3) *Validating Group Identity*. In each area, the data are explored for what group membership means for being a fashion leader.

Embodying Trends

As described in Chapter IV, participants are driven by a strong desire to be in the know regarding fashion, and therefore rely on a variety of sources to make sure they remain informed of what is current. For participants, this need to be in the know is associated with the need to be seen by others as fashionable and trendy. Both needs

are what differentiate the group from others. That is, fashion knowledge offers one entry into the group, but also establishes the identity of the group relative to other groups.

It is important to understand how the idea of “group” is defined within the context of this chapter. All participants considered themselves as being a part of a group distinguished as being fashion-forward in nature. However, the way each participant defined “group” varied. In most instances, participants made reference to their group of friends or peers when they mentioned being part of a fashion-centered group. That is, the individuals that they spend time with socially were individuals who also share a common interest in fashion. In other instances, participants referred to their clothing swap party members, in-person or online, as the group that they belonged to where fashion leadership qualities were exhibited. Last, some participants within the study were also members of a campus organization centered around fashion. In this instance, group membership was established through the fashion-driven principles and characteristics that members are expected abide by. Although how “group” is defined varied, the key element within all instances is an emphasis on fashion trends and style. This emphasis will be discussed throughout this chapter as it is seen as the glue that holds the participants together as fashion leaders.

As fashion leaders, participants seek to embrace trends as or before they happen. To participants, the ability to personify trends confirms one’s identity as a fashion leader, and therefore sanctions one’s membership in the fashion leadership group. In a sense, participants feel that sometimes they must adopt a trend in order to prove their credibility

as a fashion leader. April provides an example of this when she talks about her combat boots (see Figure 13):

A: I guess the whole combat boot thing was really in in the fall. And so, I was like... well, I need to be trendy and keep up with everyone else – so, I got these. But, I really like them... I wear them everyday.



Figure 13. April's favorite combat boots

As April explains, these boots are now one of her favorites, but her initial drive to purchase them stemmed from feeling compelled to keep up with a particular trend. As a fashion leader, she felt conscious of the need to be recognized by her peers as being in the know regarding this particular style. Thus, she adopted the trend to solidify her fashion leadership status and meet the expectation that others have of her style.

Interestingly, for some participants, the need to be recognized as a fashion leader goes beyond gaining confirmation of fashion leadership by other fashion leaders. That is,

it is also important to receive recognition from those who may be evaluating group members' credibility from the outside. As Marsha explains,

MA: We study retail... and they think that we know what's in fashion. So, people pretty much knew my criteria... "Ohhhhh, she studies fashion." So, I needed to sort of make a fashion statement – but not too much. You know... [I need] to stand out.

Marsha's example highlights the expectations that those who are not necessarily fashion leaders place on her. Because of her major in college, it is expected that she is a fashion-forward individual, so she feels she must maintain that image by making a "fashion statement." If this fashion statement is not made, her identity as a fashion leader may be compromised.

Although participants think it is important to be considered stylish and trendy by others, thereby confirming their identities as fashion leaders, many admit that they have not always belonged to this group. Through experience and repeated exposure, they began to exhibit more and more "fashion intelligence," and therefore grew into the role of fashion leader by becoming more stylish. Monica discusses her progression toward becoming a fashion leader in the following excerpt:

M: Like when I was younger – I don't think I had a real style anyway. My mom would put me in all these clothes... I thought they were ugly. And I didn't know how to wear them. But, now some of those same things... like vests and scarves and things. Well, my style has developed and so now I have fun wearing it... as opposed to when I hated it.

Monica recognizes that she has evolved into a more stylish individual. What once seemed unappealing is now something she has fun wearing. She has refined and developed her style in a way that now confirms her identity as fashion leader. April recounts a similar experience regarding her fashion evolution which took place during the first year of college:

A: Like what I used to wear and what I wear now are completely different. I find myself looking at completely different clothes. For instance, this shirt has a see-through back [referring to a shirt in her closet]. I probably wouldn't have worn that in high school... and I'm a freshman. So, just in a year I feel like I've grown a lot as an individual.

As April's interest in fashion has evolved, so has what she considers appropriate for her individual style.

Gena has also experienced an evolution of sorts in her style. After a recent move to North Carolina for college, she finds herself more open to fashions that are new and different. Gena details this transition, and how it has impacted her style goals:

G: It's me just growing up and experiencing new things. Like, I always knew I had some type of, I guess, inner love for fashion. I just never kind of went through with it. And being at UNCG kind of helped [bring it out]. Like, I just transferred here last semester, so I am kinda trying a new beginning. I'm just trying new things. [I'm] not trying to be in my same bubble. You know, it just works to be different sometimes.

Being at UNCG, Gena now has the confidence to act on her love for fashion in an outward manner. That is, the recent transition to college has challenged her to be different and display her individuality through clothing. She is at a point where she wants to embrace the trends and assert her status as a fashion leader.

In some instances, embodying trends is so important to participants that they purchase items just because they are in style. That is, they know that they may not have an opportunity to wear the garment in the future, but still wanted to possess it. Marsha explains this idea based on a fashionable dress that is in her closet which she has yet to wear:

M: I love this dress, but I have never worn this dress! Look... there's tags still on it, but look how beautiful this dress is! Like, it's one of my faves, but I haven't worn it because maybe it's too fashionable or too out there... But it was one of those items that I saw and I just said "I have to have it!"

Marsha had to have this dress because fashion is what she is all about. Although this style may be "too out there," it is an item that she feels must at least have in her possession.

Members of the clothing swap website Swapstyle.com also make reference to this behavior of buying a trend out of pure adoration, yet never wearing it. In the case of these individuals, however, they returned the item instead of letting it sit in the closet like Marsha. As the swappers discuss, however, they can feel regret afterwards:

C: Have you ever bought something you really love, then took it back for some reason? I bought a pair of rockin' Bebe jeans with studded back pockets that I really LOVED plus they were on sale. I ended up taking them back so I could get a pair of stupid Hollister jeans. Worst decision ever.

H: Haha, I have done that.

L: Oh yeah, I do that all the time...I don't know, I think maybe I'm just addicted to shopping and returning things, LOL. But yeah, I bought a Dooney and Bourke

bag I'd been wanting for FOREVER...then I returned it 'cause I needed the cash more.

I observed a similar kind of behavior during one of the swap parties. As mentioned in Chapter IV, Kenya was immediately attracted to a yellow turban brought to the party by another guest. Kenya made reference to this yellow turban as soon as she began browsing the objects laid out for display. Kenya had seen the turban trend in magazines, but was not yet confident enough to try it. She repeatedly shared what she knew about the trend with other guests at the party. Surprisingly, when it was finally Kenya's turn to choose from the various garments, she did not go for the turban. Other swappers poked fun at her for choosing a different item after making the group hear all about how she liked the turban trend. However, by her third turn to swap, she went straight for the yellow turban. Kenya stated that she had to have it because she knew it was a popular trend and one she wanted to try. She remarked that she would figure out how to make it work within her wardrobe later. She was, obviously, determined to embody the trend. Moreover, it helped that, as discussed in Chapter IV, Kenya got further direction on exactly how to wear the turban through the references to Solange Knowles made by the other guests.

Participants seem compelled to not just be aware of trends, but to own them and wear them. Being associated with current styles and emerging trends communicates to their peers and others that they are fulfilling their role as fashion leaders. Therefore, this association allows them to publicly display their "right" to be members of the fashion leadership group, as it confirms the goals of the group. To a similar end, participants, as

fashion leaders, displayed other kinds of group-oriented behavior, including sharing ideas and information, which is the focus of the next thematic area.

Sharing Styles

To maintain their reputations for distinctive looks and knowledge of trends, participants tend to rely on other fashion leaders for style information. Thus, not only do participants use resources such as magazines and blogs to stay on top of styles, they also observe what other fashion leaders are buying and wearing. Essentially, their fashion forward peers serve as barometers for what is fashionable. It appears that the more this sharing occurs among group members, the more the group's identity is strengthened.

Sharing styles is a frequent practice among participants. Indeed, it seems as though each has an innate curiosity not just about trends, but how other fashion leaders interpret those trends through their apparel choices. That is, these fashion leaders are acute observers of each other. As Monica explains:

M: I like to compare fashion styles... and I like to see what other people are wearing. It also helps you to delve into another style if you want to... I don't like to miss out on anything when it comes to clothes, so I am always looking at what someone else has.

Monica does not want to risk being unaware of what is current regarding fashion. After all, her fashion awareness is what confirms her membership in the fashion leadership group. Therefore, she consistently seeks insight from other fashion leaders in terms of their individual styles and interpretation of trends. Jaime describes a similar focus on observation, "I think I just sit around class and look at people's outfits. It's just like – ohhhhhh, I like the way she wears that... that's cool!" According to participants, sharing

styles is reciprocal, in that they each benefit from the give and take of this fashion-related information.

In my observation of clothing swap websites, I came across an interesting, and perhaps more literal approach to sharing styles and fashion information. Amanda, a member of Rehash.com, wrote an article in the fashion section of the website detailing her obsession with fashion magazines. She felt some level of guilt given the extensive waste of trees that stemmed from the production of these magazines. Realizing that her fashion-forward peers may share a love for the same type of magazines, Amanda decided to initiate “magazine swaps” with them in an effort combat waste. An excerpt from Amanda’s article explains the concept in more detail:

AM: I ’m the type of person that absolutely has to read every fashion and beauty magazine I can get my hands on, sometimes in three languages. From Allure to W, they’re a mandatory monthly to-do. Once upon a time I held about eight subscriptions and the stacks grew to obscene heights (those September issues are HUGE!). It distressed me to see piles of magazines and think of all the poor trees that had to go down so I can get my fix. Most fashion glossies do not get printed on recycled paper. In fact, their yearly “Green” issues are only about 5-10% recycled paper, some claim. And that’s just one issue out of twelve each year. Sad panda.

So, I needed to find a solution to my passive tree-killing habit. I decided to get together with a few gym buddies who also read the same type of magazines I do while working out. We each took on one or two subscriptions and decided to “Rehash” them, circulating them amongst each other every month. So when I get mine in and I’m finished with them, I trade with another friend who has a different subscription, and so on and so forth. So far it’s worked great and I feel less guilty about this particular pleasure. It’s like a book trading club but...well, yes it’s exactly like that, just with monthly glossies.

Essentially, Amanda's idea of "rehashing" the magazines allows the swappers to share styles and trends through the use of the magazines that they share. Although the root of Amanda's motivation was sustainability, her behavior, along with that of fellow swappers, resulted in a sharing, or swapping, of style information.

I observed there to be different levels of fashion and trend adoption within the group. Although all participants possessed a certain proclivity towards fashion-forward apparel, this did not mean that they were open to embracing all trends at the same time. In fact, some talked about how they may admire styles worn by other group members, but may not be bold enough to try the particular looks. Veronica discusses this in relation to a group member who attended one of the clothing swap parties:

V: Like I don't remember the girl who was sitting next to me – she had on the blue sweater and the tights. I liked her look, but I wouldn't necessarily go out and buy that kind of stuff for me 'cause I wouldn't think I could pull it off like she did.

Veronica is very into fashion and stays in the know regarding trends. She is a part of the fashion-forward group, but at times she takes a little longer to consider how certain items may or may not suit her fashion aims.

Participants talked about how shopping often provides a context for sharing styles. On certain occasions, participants will shop together and exchange style information as part of the shopping process. Tracy talks about how this can expand her awareness of style alternatives:

T: With group shopping... like if I were with my cousin and she may have picked up something that I may not have necessarily picked up myself and then try it on.

Like, I think that in general with other people's influence... I do think that I am more into trying something different with a different set of eyes.

For Tracy, shopping with others can help her step out of the box and consider more innovative choices.

Oftentimes, the sharing of styles is intentional. However, sometimes it is unintentional, with styles being shared and then adopted without individuals even realizing it. As Jaime explains:

J: I feel like the more you hang out with certain people, the more you kind of... you don't copy their stuff... but, you kind of like – I don't know. It just kind of rubs off on you.

Styles seem to “rub off” on Jaime by being in the presence of her fashion-forward peers. As a form of group behavior, it seems natural that she would adopt what is deemed stylish to reinforce her fashion leader identity and group membership. Likewise, April provides an example of this dynamic,

A: This is a really good example! Chelsea, since the beginning of the year has always worn high-waisted shorts. And I like high-waisted jeans... but now, I like high-waisted shorts too!

Interestingly, April happened to be wearing a pair of high-waisted shorts the day of the closet interview (see Figure 14). She commented on how she felt comfortable in the shorts, and that she was glad she decided to try the trend.



Figure 14. April wearing her high-waisted shorts

Instances where one person's style rubs off onto someone else is not only confined to the sharing of specific fashions, but it appears to also apply to the sharing of an entire type of style. For instance, Mackenzie is an international student who had a preference for a certain apparel style before she moved to the United States. However, through observation, the style category most prevalent among her peers here in the United States has become her own. Mackenzie explains:

MC: [Normally] I'm more like [a] practical person... that I don't want to buy clothes that I will be able to wear like [a] couple of times... but since I [have] come to the United States, I realize that I buy more products that have, how can I say... [that are] perishable.

Before coming to the United States, Mackenzie's clothing was more classic and involved less frequent style changes. However, since moving to the United States her preferences have changed, and she has adopted a more fast-fashion, trend-driven style.

Styles are also shared among members within the online swapping context. Given their common interest in fashion, fashion leaders look to each other to provide feedback on new styles and trends that they may have tried that have proven to be successful. The online venue is particularly conducive for doing this, as members can quickly get feedback from other swappers through the chats that comprise the open forums of each site. The following is an example of a post between swappers where styles are being shared, and where, in this instance, one member was interested in hearing about the latest trends from fellow members:

B: What's the newest/fave fashion find you have come across?

A: I want jeans with either lace inserts or ribbons up the back. I'm trying to justify spending \$56 on a pair, lol.

K: Batik clothing.

B: Hand painted or photo printed tights! Omg, someone on Etsy has them...amazing!

G: I really like the asymmetrical/waterfall dresses.

By posing a question about styles and trends, fellow swappers can get ideas about what their peers have seen and perhaps even tried. Ultimately, when these styles are shared, it

provides others with ideas regarding trends they may be interested in or had yet to learn about.

Swapping websites can also be settings for visual ways to share styles. For example, on Rehash.com, each member is provided an area on her page called “The Gallery.” Within The Gallery, she can post pictures of items she received from swaps, and share with others how she accessorizes them. Swapper Carmen has included many pictures of items received through swaps. One item in particular, a colorful maxi dress, received positive feedback from several members (see Figure 15).



Figure 15. Carmen’s maxi dress that she acquired through online swapping

C: I am usually wearing something everyday that I've gotten through Rehash. Just thought ya'll like to see me actually wearing the stuff!! THANKS! 1 bracelet

and matching necklace from [name], Dress from [name], 2 bracelets from [name] and 1 bracelet from [name]. Thanks!

S: OMG YOU LOOK PHENOMENAL!! I'M JEALOUS...LOL....IT LOOKS GREAT ON YOU!

C: Thanks guys!

A: You could be Heather Grahams' doppleganger! (The actress, look her up if you don't know her)

C: Thanks!! Never heard that one before!

Sharing photographs of items she acquired through swaps allows Carmen to communicate various looks with her fellow swappers. As a result, other Rehash.com members can get ideas from her fashion examples. This sharing, in turn, enhances the relationship between swappers, as styles are shared freely and fashion leadership is maintained.

As the data reveal, style ideas are frequently swapped alongside actual clothing, and I observed this to be the case both in person and online. While some style sharing is intentional, some is more unintentional. All involve an exchange that benefits the individual as well as the group and primarily by strengthening ties between members. The implications of these ties for fashion leadership identity are discussed in the next section.

Validating Group Identity

As discussed earlier, participants rely on other fashion leaders for trend information. They expect each other to be fully immersed in what is going on in fashion. Therefore, participants exhibited a certain amount of respect for and trust in each other. Indeed, an emphasis on the knowledge and skills of peers helps to validate the group's fashion identity. Members seek validation from the group to confirm that their apparel choices fit with those of the group as a whole, thereby endorsing its role in terms of fashion. Mackenzie describes how validation from her peers makes her feel:

I: So, tell me what that feels like... when someone really likes your items.

MC: To be honest – it's just like... if you're a designer for example. Um, you want people to like what you created. But, it's kind of the same way... that I picked that item because I might have liked it... and when people like the things I liked – it's like "Ohhhhhhh, I am a good pick!"

Mackenzie compares herself to a fashion designer, in that she creates her own style through different combinations of garments. Although she feels confident in her selections, the added confirmation of her skills by her peers reassures her of her fashion sense and validates her membership in the fashion leadership group. In a sense, the validation from the group also affirms that she is representing the group correctly. Marsha views the concept of group validation similarly to Mackenzie, but connects it more to a validation of her own style:

MA: If someone likes your stuff, then you feel like, "Oh – I have good style. I have good taste." So, it's a real compliment to yourself if someone likes your

items... 'cause it's a reflection of you and your purchase behaviors. And so, when they like it, it's kind of saying... "Oh, I like your style."

Validation signifies to Marsha that her personal style aligns with the group's expectations of her as a fashion leader. Her clothing behaviors are affirmed, and she knows that her taste is well regarded. Consequently, this validation signals to Marsha that she is a "vested" member of the fashion leadership group.

Participants spoke about instances where group validation prompted them to step out of their comfort zone and try new things. Perhaps the individual had been wanting to take a "fashion risk," but may not have had the confidence to try something so novel.

Gena explains how this scenario has been true for her:

G: ... I feel like other people's input here is helpful... like encouraging me to try something. So, I think – it's very helpful for me!

I: Okay... what is it about their input that's appealing?

G: It just normally – like, I kind of go with what I like anyway. But, I am trying to loosen up and listen to other people... 'cause like I stick to the same things – black, white, greys. But, I am starting to do my nails different colors. So, slowly... slowly I am trying to transition out of my norm and try something different.

Gena's curiosity was already there, but confirmation from the group signaled to her that stepping out of her comfort zone is approved, thereby giving her the confidence to be more innovative. Similarly, Kenya describes how her apprehensiveness about trying a style can disappear in the face of support from others:

I: There was a lot of group feedback and lots of comments when people were trying things out. Do you think that was important... the actual feedback and the comments?

K: Ohhhhhh yeah! I think that if you are apprehensive about something... if someone is like – “Girl, that would look good on you – wear that with so and so...” and then they’re like – “Girl that looks good!”

Kenya’s doubt about certain items and how they would work for her can be dissuaded once her peers tell her how flattering the items would look on her. Because of the level of trust and respect she has for the opinions of other fashion leaders, she has even reconsidered certain items at a swap as a result of their feedback. I witnessed this with respect to a bubble dress she was considering. Kenya was drawn to the dress because of its color, but she was not sure about the overall shape of the dress. She even held the dress up to see how it would drape on her (see Figure 16), but decided she did not like it because it was too bulky. Before she could put the dress back on the rack, however, other guests suggested that it may be more flattering if she cinched the waist with a wide belt. The host had a belt that she could use to further evaluate the dress. Given the group’s suggestion, Kenya agreed to try the dress on. Modeling the complete look for the other guests, Kenya received many positive comments, and she ended up taking the dress home.



Figure 16. Kenya assessing the mustard colored bubble dress

Validation from peers is important to participants, such that many also talked about its importance during the shopping process. Mackenzie explains this as it applies to how she shops for clothes:

MC: When you take friends shopping with you, it's not just for like... "Oh, I want to have company." But, it's something like you want to have assistance or feedback from a person who knows your style. And sometimes I don't even know that I would not look good in this. But, my friend who is a viewer – [she] actually knows what looks good on me.

Validation from someone who is aware fashion trends helps Mackenzie feel more assured in her decision-making. She trusts that her friend will not only tell her what looks good

and fits with her style, but that her friend will also be honest enough to tell her what is not flattering or fashion-forward enough.

Participants also talked about the ways they find support on occasions when their personal “fashion barometers” are not shopping along with them. Tracy describes using her phone to send photos:

T: I think in general when you’re shopping, a second opinion is always good. I think you go for what you think... but then having other eyes [is good]. ‘Cause even if I shop by myself sometimes, I will take a cell phone picture and send it to my sister like... “Does this look okay.” You know, “What do you think about this?” “I’m thinking about wearing this to a wedding... are these shoes nice?”

Evidence of the desire for group validation can also be seen in the online realm. In one instance that I observed, a member of an online clothing swap site wanted feedback about whether or not she should shop from a particular clothing website. This request is not unusual, as swappers also shop at stores outside of particular swapping websites, and group members are often aware of various websites that have diverse merchandise.

H: Anyone ever order from here before? <http://coniefoxdresses.com> or know anyone who has? Just need to know if it’s a good site or not!

N: A lot of people buy from that site and try to sell the stuff on Etsy saying it’s handmade. It’s a wholesale site, so you have to buy a minimum of something like 20 pieces for most.

Getting information from a fellow swapper helps the individual make a more informed decision because she considers the information to be coming from a credible source.

One interesting point that surfaced was the extent to which the absence of validation by individuals who are not fashion leaders can mean almost as much as validation by other fashion leaders. That is, if people who are not fashion leaders, and perhaps are less innovative with their styles, found participants' apparel choices unappealing, then the participants knew that they had made the right style choice. As Monica puts it, "I always know [that] if my mom hates it – it's gotta be cool!" Mom's dislike of the item assures Monica that her choice is unique enough for her fashion leader peer group. Thus, responses of those who are not a part of the group can actually serve to validate one's membership in the group.

Summary

Participants rely on others to help them establish and maintain their identity as fashion leaders. At the same time, to maintain group membership, they must possess certain skills and engage in particular behaviors that reinforce their fashion leadership identity. Group membership is essential to the identity of the fashion leader, and fashion leadership is essential to group membership. Through this symbiotic relationship, participants point to how their individual identities are strengthened alongside the group's identity. As will be discussed in the next chapter, clothing swaps are contexts that require similarly reciprocal kinds of relationships, as such are consumption settings in which the interplay between the individual and the group serves as the foundation for exchange.

CHAPTER VI

THE CLOTHING EXCHANGE EXPERIENCE

As discussed in Chapter II, clothing exchange events have become more and more prevalent, and are particularly popular among female consumers. These events are often referred to as “clothing swaps,” and allow participants to swap their gently used clothes, accessories, and shoes with others. Although swaps have become increasingly popular, both in person and online, the phenomenon has not been extensively examined in the literature. This chapter therefore provides an interpretation of participants’ experiences relative to what it means to swap.

As will be discussed in this chapter, there are distinct rules for swapping, whether it is at a party or through a website. These rules structure the swap process and provide a protocol for exchange that everyone must follow. Examination of guidelines that exist within the clothing swap environment reveal how swappers use cooperation and bartering to achieve their consumption goals. In this chapter, five thematic areas are used to structure an understanding of the participants’ experiences within the clothing swap environment: (1) *Swapping Rules, Responsibilities, and Procedures*, (2) *Giving and Receiving*, (3) *Socializing and Swapping*, (4) *Passing Judgment*, and (5) *Talking Brand*.

Swapping Rules, Responsibilities, and Procedures

According to participants, swapping is a unique kind of consumption experience. Swap environments are usually casual, open, and honest, yet there are certain rules that

participants are expected to adhere to. Oftentimes, participants mention additional “unwritten” rules and practices that naturally evolve within the exchange environment. Three issues emerged in the data which help to explain how such practices help to structure the nature of the swap experience: (a) *Communicating the Swap*, (b) *Contributing to the Swap*, and (c) *Managing the Swap*. Each are discussed in turn in the following sections.

Communicating the Swap

One of the most important roles within the in-person clothing swap process is that of the swap party host. The host is the individual who plans the event, recruits attendees, and communicates the standards of the event. The tone and atmosphere of the clothing swap party is actually determined by what is communicated to guests before the event. Thus, communicating the swap is critical, so that the participants know what is expected of them. If the nature of the clothing swap and its rules are not conveyed to the swap party guests, then the effectiveness of the swap experience may be compromised. For example, guests may come to the party without clothing to contribute if they are not clear about the expectations for “swapping.”

There are different methods that a host may use to communicate about the swap to others. Although quite often it is through word-of-mouth, some hosts are more creative, and go to great lengths to produce formalized invitations. For example, Monica took the latter approach for a swap party she held for members of a campus-based organization. This organization is fashion-oriented, as described on its Facebook page:

We are an organization with a foundation in fashion. We use fashion to reach out to people, both male and female. We promote POSITIVE self-image/self-esteem! We also promote principles like accepting others as well as yourself, dressing GREAT for less MONEY and allowing your fashion to be a representation of the TRUE you!

Given the fact that this organization had just held its first fashion show, Monica decided to hold a clothing swap party as a kind of celebration. In addition, going forward she hoped to make the swapping event an annual one for the organization. To communicate this goal, she emailed a flyer that resembled an advertisement to members of the group, inviting them to “swap instead of shop” (see Figure 17).



Figure 17. Monica's swap party invitation

As seen from the flyer, setting the tone was important to Monica. Vivid colors and graphics communicate a sense of fun and excitement designed to prompt interest in the event. While this may have sparked curiosity among recipients, few details about what is expected of the guests, and exactly what the event will entail, are provided. As a result, I observed that some of the guests were confused about the clothing swap process and consequently, came to the party unprepared. For example, a few guests did not bring enough clothing to swap, as they were unclear about swapping and what it entailed. Had the concept been plainly communicated before the party they would likely have come prepared. Thus, communicating what will happen at the swap is clearly very important.

Other hosts took more direct and detailed approaches to enlisting guests for their clothing exchange events. Tonya did this for the swap party she held on a Sunday afternoon, called “Sunday’s Best.” The name of this party conveyed to guests that they should bring their “best” items to the party to swap with others. In case they missed the point, Tonya was very detailed in the e-vite about what guests were expected to bring:

TO: Let's follow some basic guidelines. (1.) Please bring at least five items (you can do more if you want). (2.) You can bring new or gently used clothes that you no longer want, accessories, scarves, purses, etc. (3.) You can bring clothes from any season! (4.) Have fun and make the most of our Sunday's Best: Clothing Swap Party!

At Tonya’s party, I observed that all of the guests came prepared to contribute equally to the process by bringing at least five items or more to swap. The guests were fully engaged in the swapping, which was evident in the way they laid out their items (see Figure 18), “marketed” their items to others, eagerly searched through the items when it

was their turn to swap (see Figure 19), and playfully modeled the items they chose for the group (see Figure 20). As a result, this clothing swap experience ran smoothly, and participants like Tracy commented that the party exceeded their expectations, “I’m very impressed with the process... I guess I didn’t go into it with any expectations – but I was very impressed with the process and with the things I got.” The success of this swapping event illustrates how important it is to communicate the rules of the swap and the responsibilities of each guest before hand.



Figure 18. Accessories table at Tonya’s party



Figure 19. Swapper examining clothing options at Tonya's party



Figure 20. Kenya modeling the earrings she chose from the swap

Communicating the nature of the swap is essential for both the in-person clothing swap party and in the online swapping environment. Indeed, clear communication about each individual's duties is perhaps even more important online, as participants are not located in the same setting. Instead, the Internet is the only thing that connects them. Thus, in order for the process to be successful, a certain standard, or level of swap expectations must be established. Swapstyle.com takes a direct approach to dealing with this. Specifically, one section of the website is called "Swap School." Information in this section gives individuals clear direction on how to become a member of the website, how to develop a profile, and the process to be followed for exchanging within the site. Its purpose is to teach newcomers about the swap process and what is expected of everyone. In addition to "Swap School," the website also includes a "Profile" area where members can set up a personal page with personal information, items they have swapped in the past, and a list of various preferences they have for items they like to swap.

Another element of Swapstyle.com is the concept of "tokens." Tokens represent positive feedback that other swappers have posted about an individual's swapping behavior. Thus, every time a successful swap takes place, members can go to each other's profile and award tokens. If the rules are followed and swappers have good experiences with other swappers, then tokens become symbols of one's level of swapping experience and expertise. In a sense, it is a way for swappers to decide whether or not they want to swap with a particular individual, as a higher number of tokens suggests a higher level of credibility. Thus, the token system serves as a benefit of participating according to site rules, which helps to ensure positive swapping experiences through the

site. Indeed, without clear communication via elements like the token system and the “Swap School,” the online exchange process would likely be chaotic. Swapstyle.com also has a “Forum” area where members can post on different topics, questions, or concerns. This forum is open to anyone who can access the site; however, only members are allowed to comment and post. Finally, one of the more important parts of the website, of course, is the “swapping space,” which is found across all different types of online swaps. For Swapstyle.com, access to the “swapping space” is found through the “Browse Swaps” link at the top of the homepage. This is where a listing of the most recent items available to be swapped can be found. Members can view the items, read product specifications, and see photos of the items being worn so that they can determine how the items might fit.

Communicating about how to swap is critical. Like other kinds of social interaction, swappers must know what is expected of them in order to act appropriately. If the guidelines are not communicated, then an inadvertent transgression on the part of a party guest or online swapper is likely to occur. Such transgressions can hinder the swapping experience and result in hesitation on the part of others to swap with that individual.

Contributing to the Swap

Within swap party culture, each participant is assigned a specific role. All participants bring something unique to the swap party simply by being present in the environment. Thus, perhaps the most salient unwritten rule that exists in the swap

community is that everyone must contribute to the swap in some form. That is, there is an expectation that everyone will help to support the successful execution of the event.

I observed this notion of contribution to be the key to Tamara's clothing swap party. Tamara had attended several clothing swap parties in the past and therefore had very specific ideas about how she wanted to execute her party. She wanted the party to be organized, but at the same time create a fun and social atmosphere. As a result, she paid close attention to detail, including the plates and napkins she chose for the event (see Figure 21), as well as the shopping bags she provided for each guest (see Figure 22).



Figure 21. Decorative plates and napkins from Tamara's clothing swap party



Figure 22. Shopping bags given to guests of Tamara's party

Tamara took her role as host seriously and even enlisted the guests' help to achieve her vision of a successful swap party. For example, Tamara felt that it was important to have a clothing rack to display items so that participants could easily go through them to make their selections. Tamara knew that one of her guests, Jasmine, had a clothing rack, so she asked Jasmine to contribute by bringing her clothing rack to the party (see Figure 23).



Figure 23. Items displayed on Jasmine's rack

Other participants were asked to bring food to be shared, such as chips and brownies. Tamara prepared several dishes, but she also wanted to have finger foods available. Thus, through Tamara's guidance, everyone helped to create the atmosphere she wanted for her swap party. Beyond just bringing clothing items to swap, the contributions of each participant reflected a level of commitment to the process and its outcomes.

I observed similar expectations concerning contribution in the online swapping community. When two swappers agree to exchange clothing with one another and one of them does not hold up her end of the bargain, the process literally falls apart. Indeed, in the Internet environment there is no way of knowing if both swappers will do their part. Thus, if the standards of exchange are not followed, then there are consequences. For instance, on Swapstyle.com, I observed several forum posts that refer to what the swapping community calls "swaplifters." Swaplifters are individuals who agree to swap

items with another individual, but never send the items they agree to swap. Once this occurs, experienced swappers post warning messages to inform others in the community.

This warning is exhibited in Priscilla's post about someone who is a repeat offender:

P: Don't swap with [name]. She is a KNOWN swaplifter from Rehash. Her name is [name]. Sometimes she chooses parts of these names, sometimes others. Sometimes she spells it [name] too, I believe. Everytime she started a new profile she would swap a bit and then begin swaplifting. I REPEAT DO NOT SWAP WITH HER! Her feedback doesn't show as very bad because she would cancel trades on Rehash to get out of sending her end. She apparently started trying to make it right but I don't believe that she even skimmed the surface of those she screwed out of things. Happy Swapping!

Because there is little recourse for the swaplifting victim, the best way to penalize the offender is through such forum warnings. Ultimately, if the rules of contribution established by the community are not followed, then swappers reserve the right to express their disapproval openly out of concern for the site and its members.

Managing the Swap

Alongside equal contribution, the actual process of exchange between participants is central to the clothing swap. Each stage within this process must be completed in a particular order to help it flow and to give each participant a fair chance at acquiring items. Thus, the swap must be managed, and in the case of the face-to-face swap, this is generally the host's responsibility.

The host determines how the party will proceed, and often tries to make sure that participants are satisfied with the outcome. This was the approach Marsha sought for her clothing swap party, as she explained in the interview:

I: What would you say the ideal clothing swap experience would be?

MA: Ideal would be [that] everyone's happy, you know. I think because we're all friends – I don't think anyone's gonna be upset about it. But, I just think [that it's important that] everyone's happy... everyone has a good time. And, that... sort of, like, the process runs smoothly.

In order to make this goal a reality, many hosts use a neutral means of deciding the order in which guests swap. For instance, an individual's name may be written on a piece of paper and put into a hat, which signifies that it is time for the swapping to begin. Once a person's name is selected out of the hat, they can browse the merchandise, try things on, and then choose what they would like. The next name is then pulled from the hat, and that person chooses from the items. Some hosts opt to use a similar method, but instead of names, they write numbers on pieces of paper. With this process, whatever number the swapper picks out of the hat will be the order that is assigned to them for each swapping round. Thus, if a person picks the number 1, then they will be the first to choose an item for each round (see Figure 24).



Figure 24. Swapper displaying the number she received.

This drawing of names or numbers helps the swap flow smoothly and gives each participant a fair chance at the available items.

At some swap parties the process of swapping can be managed even more closely. For instance, Tamara determined the amount of items participants could swap based on the number of items they brought to the event. If a person brought 7 items, then they were given 7 pom-poms, such that pom-poms signified the number of items the individual brought, as well as the number of items she would be able to take home with her. To manage this, every time a swapper chose an item, in exchange, she would give up a pom-pom. Thus, the pom-poms served as a payment of sorts, and when she had exhausted all of her pom-poms, then her swapping ended. The point of this was to manage the swap such that no one took more items than they contributed.

The data highlight the rules, responsibilities, and procedures that exist within clothing swap culture, and how such expectations order the swap process and provide it with a sense of structure. Expectations for exchange also help to ensure that participants enjoy the swap, as they can be assured that they will benefit from the swap process through its built in mechanism for both giving and receiving.

Giving and Receiving

Swap culture entails a great deal of give and take, hence the name “swap.” Yet, I observed that swap culture involves the exchange of material goods, like clothing, as well as ideas and advice. Participants noted that this give and take serves to connect individuals as it creates an environment of trust. Thus, a focus on reciprocity is essential for the culture to thrive, and this is the case whether the swap is happening in person or online.

Giving

Participants appeared to gladly accept the role of “giver” in the clothing swap environment and willingly took part in the giving process. They all talked about how their inclination to give is a necessity for “swapping” to exist, but they also talked about several benefits associated with the act of giving.

One advantage of swaps that participants mentioned frequently was that it forced them to clean out their closets. That is, the clothing swap provides an opportunity to take inventory of the items in their closets and make decisions as to what should be kept or disposed of. Tamara states, “It’s a good way to clean out your closet and get organized for the next season.” For Tamara, preparing for the clothing swap party aids her in

making room for the new season. She assesses what she will keep and get rid of, and then organizes her closet accordingly. The process also allows her to see the gaps she needs to fill through the swap process. Tracy explains a similar benefit of preparing for the clothing swap process, “It is beneficial in terms of seeing things that you want get rid of. So, it’s kind of purging and recycling through your own garments.” The clothing swap process not only allows Tracy the chance to get rid of items she no longer wants, but those items are then “recycled” through the swapping process. This extends the life of Tracy’s item, which, in turn, positively impacts her inclination to give as part of the clothing swap.

Indeed, the recycling factor resonated with several participants, who think that the clothing swap party is a smart concept because it helps consumers to be less wasteful. In other words, clothes that would normally be thrown out or ignored continue to be worn. Thus, the lifecycle of a garment is lengthened. As April explains, “I think it’s good for the clothes. They get more wear out of them instead of just being tossed... You can give them to your friends and they won’t get thrown away just because you’re tired of them.” Mackenzie has a similar opinion, and sees the reuse of items through the swap as a reduction in overall waste:

MC: Yeah, I think it’s a good thing to do in terms of reducing. So, I feel like yeah, this is a nice thing to do. I mean, you cannot stop people from buying new things – but it will slow the process of “Oh, I need new clothes.” But, when you have this item which is new to you... even though it’s old for the owner - I think it still kind of makes you feel excited and slow[s] [you] down from buying new clothes.

For Mackenzie, the slowing down of the consumption process is a clear benefit of swapping, in that it allows consumers to get new-to-them items without actually buying anything. Moreover, from Mackenzie's perspective, swappers give something to get the excitement of having something new, and without having to be wasteful with their spending.

In a similar vein, some participants note that the swap opportunity helps to reduce the guilt that they feel regarding the unused items that reside in their closets. Because participants are fashion leaders, shopping is an activity that they engage in frequently. As a result, clothing tends to build up in their closets, including clothing that has never been worn. Participants talked about how this excess leads to feelings of guilt. The clothing swap process prevents this clothing surplus, as it allows participants to get rid of items that have not have been worn for a while or may have never been worn at all. Hannah explains how swaps help her feel better about consuming:

H: The thing I liked at the party is that I can give my clothes to others... especially my friends. I have been feeling guilty about clothes that I don't use or wear. But, after giving to others, I feel very happy that someone else likes my clothes.

Knowing that feelings of guilt will be reduced through participation in the clothing swap process facilitates Hannah's desire to give more. Knowing that her friends will use clothing that she did not makes her happy and helps rid her of feelings of guilt. Thus, for Hannah, the advantages of clothing swap parties are two-fold, as she enjoys giving her clothes away to friends that value them, and the fact that her unused items will actually

be worn by others provides her with a certain level of satisfaction. Conversely, the receiver gets satisfaction from getting a new-to-her item. This proved to be true for swapper Jennifer, as she was excited to receive earrings that had never been worn (see Figure 25).



Figure 25. Earrings modeled by Jennifer that had never been worn by the “giver”

According to participants, another advantage of the clothing swap process, which also makes them more inclined to give, is the instant gratification they get from the act of giving. That is, as Marsha explains, participants can see others enjoying the items right away:

M: You can see, you know – your donation of clothing right away and someone enjoying it. Whereas if you donate to Goodwill or something like that, you never really know where it ends up. It could be bundled in a bag and sent to another country, you know? But when your friends wear it – it’s a more closer connection to your clothes.

The swapping experience allows Marsha to witness others’ appreciation of her “donation” in real-time. The enjoyment of her clothing by friends rather than strangers

provides her with a more personal connection. In contrast, when she donates her clothes to charity venues, the benefit of a close connection with the receiver does not exist.

Because Marsha sees her clothing as an extension of herself, swapping allows her the satisfaction of seeing others appreciate her clothing and, in turn, makes her more willing to give of her unwanted clothing in this way.

Although giving was exciting for participants, it is important to note that some had difficulty parting with certain items, whether due to nostalgic value, the potential for future use, or the reoccurrence of the particular style. These factors seem to get in the way of some participants' desire to exchange clothing, even though the desire to give was sincere. For example, Marsha had some difficulty in determining what she would donate at the swap party she was planning. Given her role as host, she had a vested interest in making sure the clothing swap experience was successful. This meant that she must donate her fair share of items at the party. However, feelings of nostalgia made the decision-making process difficult. She explains,

M: ... Sentimental value. Part of me wishes that I didn't have it, but I do. You know, there's this part of me that says "I will never wear this." But, then I'm like, "You know – my Grandma gave it to me. I won't wear it, but I have to keep it."

Items given to Marsha by her grandmother remained in her closet, even though they will likely never be worn. Clearly some clothing has too much sentimental value to share even with other fashion leaders.

Some participants talked about the potential for regretting decisions as a deterrent to donation. That is, the occasion may arise when they will want to wear something that

they gave away at a swap. This requires that they donate items that they truly have lost interest in, which is a difficult task. As Kenya explains:

K: I think that would be the biggest task... just finding something that you're really not gonna use again. Yeah... and not only are you not going to use it again, but you also don't mind seeing your friend walking around with the outfit that you wish you still had. You know, 'cause it's one thing to give it away to Goodwill... 'cause you probably will never see it again. But, if you have a friend who's got your jumpsuit on now and you're like "Dag... I wanted to wear that yesterday!" And, she's walking around all proud with it – You're like, "Girl... just take off that jumpsuit!" (laughs)

Based on Kenya's account, the potential for regret is more relevant through swaps because she may see her friends actually wearing the clothing and prompt her to want it back. Although Kenya discusses this scenario from a humorous perspective, the potential for regret is there, and in some cases can hamper the propensity to give.

Another risk of giving items away mentioned by participants was that the item might come back in style. The idea of not having access to an item when a trend reoccurs was something that participants considered when deciding what to give at a swap. Thus, like Tamara, many talked about thinking twice about giving away items that are more trend-focused: "It was hard because I have a hard time letting things go... just because you never know when things are gonna come back in style." According to participants, however, it is a risk that most swappers are willing to take, particularly given the fact that through their giving they may receive items that are just as valuable.

Receiving

It was clear from discussions with participants that the most appealing feature of the clothing swap party was the idea of getting "new" clothing for free. As discussed in

Chapter IV, as fashion leaders, participants have a strong fashion orientation and enjoy shopping for clothing. Thus, being able to “shop” for items that come from the closets of their fashion-forward peers is appealing to them. In addition, the fact that this process does not require monetary exchange makes it all the more exciting. April explains the appeal of the process, and specifically as it relates to her budget constraints, “The idea of trading clothes with my friends and not having to buy new clothes really appeals to me... and I’m kinda strapped [for money] right now.” For April, being able to swap clothes with her friends is exciting, but even moreso because buying new clothes is not an option for her given a lack of funds. Thus, the swapping experience allows her to get something new-to-her without impacting her budget.

Quite a few of the participants talked about being on a limited or tight budget, and pointed to shopping at thrift, consignment, or second-hand stores often. However, participants seemed to prefer the clothing swap party over second-hand venues like Goodwill. Because they know exactly who and where the clothing came from at the clothing swap party, they felt more secure about the items. Thus, the experience of acquiring clothes through the swap environment is different from certain second-hand venues. Mackenzie explains why she prefers receiving in the clothing swap venue over Goodwill:

MC: I love that we [are] able to, you know... kind of have new items, but we don’t feel suspicious about it. Because sometimes when I go to Goodwill, I’m not 100% sure about like cleanliness and who has worn this before. But, because the swap party... it’s like your friends. So, you know them. So, I have no worry about that kind of problem.

In the clothing exchange environment, Mackenzie does not have to deal with the apprehensiveness she sometimes feels when she receives clothes from Goodwill. The items she obtains from swapping are coming from her friends, who are fellow fashion leaders, which prompts her to trust the clothing as well as its “person of origin.”

Participants frequently talked about the possibility of receiving a friend’s item that they have had their eye on. Given that clothing swap parties are usually hosted and attended by groups of friends or acquaintances, most have had the opportunity to observe each other’s styles and are aware of what they like. Friends may have even identified specific styles or items that they want to borrow from each other. The clothing swap experience, therefore, allows them the opportunity to acquire these items. Veronica talks about how this is a possibility that gets her excited about the swap process:

V: I think it’s cool because you always have that friend where you’re like – “Oh, you need to let me hold that item”... or something like that. And, if you are going to do it with a group of friends, then that item could be there and you can have it... and you’re like, “Thank you!”

The idea that one person’s “throw-away” could be another person’s treasure was frequently brought up by the participants, and helps to illustrate how as fashion leaders, each may exhibit different levels of adoption as related to a given trend. That is, while one participant may be finished with a certain trend, another may just be developing an interest in it. Thus, the latter may see value in an item that no longer meets the former’s fashion needs. Jasmine enjoys the experience of obtaining something new that others may not see the value of: “I really like the idea of, you know – like one person’s trash may be another person’s treasure. So, I love that we could bring in our items and maybe

get something new in exchange.” Monica also finds this part of swapping appealing, as she gets excited about turning someone else’s trash into something that is uniquely her own.

M: To have a big room of clothes that are from someone else... which I think is so cool when something is from someone else. Because something that they don’t like... you could love. You know, it’s kind of cool when someone’s thrown something away... you’re like, “Oh, I actually like that.” And you can turn it into whatever you want. So, to have that big room of things that I can look at and pull out whatever I want... it sounds like a kid in a candy store!

From Monica’s perspective, receiving another swapper’s trash gives her the opportunity to give it her own fashion spin. That is, the way she pairs it with other items can make it different and uniquely her own.

As discussed in Chapter V, fashion leader group membership is maintained by the sharing of styles, as members rely on each other for style information. Within the clothing swap environment, this sharing of styles can be seen in an immediate sense, as during the swap party swappers not only receive clothing, but also receive advice and ideas from each other. I observed numerous instances where a swapper was considering an item, but was somewhat apprehensive about it. The individual would try on the item, show it to the other swap swappers, and then get feedback. Quite often, the swappers would all chime in and start suggesting how she could wear the item and the best way to accessorize it. Consequently, the more advice and suggestions she received, the more comfortable and confident she became. Mackenzie discusses how she finds this interplay to be beneficial:

MC: I also feel it's like more like... we see each other's styles. You know, like when we talk about what would she pair with these pants or this shirt... something like that. It's kind of like you have somebody to discuss about style or what you should pair this with.

For Mackenzie, others at the clothing swap party have credibility as fashion leaders.

Thus, she trusts their opinions and readily receives their advice and feedback.

The desire to receive not only something new to wear, but advice as to how to wear it, also surfaced in the online swap environment. Once members of the swapping websites become acquainted, and perhaps swap with one another, a connection is often formed. Members rely on this connection, and each other, for information, and seem to be extremely open to receiving advice from members once a trustworthy relationship has been established. I observed this to be the case many times within the open forums on the PoshSwaps.com, Rehash.com, and Swapstyle.com websites, where members use these forums to talk about a diverse range of topics, with fashion being the most common among them.

For example, the open forum is a significant part of the swapping website known as Rehash. Called "The Forest," members can post questions about anything from fashion to swapping rules and so on. Within The Forest members catch up with one another and share advice and suggestions, just as they would at an in-person swap party. The following excerpt is an example of this sort of interaction, as one Rehash member seeks suggestions on where to find a specific item:

K: I'm trying to find a pair of red jeans. Any suggestions of places/brands I should look at?

KC: H&M my lovely! We sell all kinds of red jeans :) and pink and green and blue and yellow...well, you get the idea LOL.

K: Thanks so much Katie. The closest H&M is about an hour away from me. I think I may be going out today :)

AN: I got some pink/red skinny jeans at Kohl's. Their jeans selection right now is really impressive. I must have tried on 5 different types in all different colors.

KI: I used to see them at Forever 21 around here, but since it's summery in Cali there's only shorts... maybe in the sale items? Also, Pacsun, and I believe Tillys has a wide variety as well of colored jeans.

Looking for a specific type of item, a member reaches out to others in the Rehash community because she knows that she will receive the information she is looking for. Clearly she views others who are posting on the swap website as credible sources. Therefore, she is inclined to solicit suggestions and guidance from them, even without any in-person contact.

Seeking fashion advice is also seen on the UK based clothing swap website Posh Swaps. In addition to the Posh Swaps swapping space, there is an extensive blog containing fashion advice and recommendations. Members of the Posh Swap website can easily access the blog, as the link to it is clearly displayed at the top of the swapping webpage. The blog, in a sense, is their portal to information about the latest trends and how to incorporate these trends into their wardrobes, in addition to the items they may receive from swaps. For instance, the blog recently featured an article that gave suggestions to swappers about accessories for the upcoming spring and summer:

Fashion news: Accessories for Spring

We take a look at what the fashion pack are backing this spring/summer, and how it can work for you.

The big news of this spring summer – aside from the Olympics, obviously – is colour. And it's not just the colourful daffodils and tulips that we're seeing dotted across the parks and fields of the country. Colour is making a comeback in our clothes, and it's high time we brightened up our wardrobes a little.

There are two big colour trends this summer. The first, and most celeb-driven and influential, is a penchant for pastels. Think toned-down pinks, greens, peaches and oranges from the roaring shades we saw last summer.

Tones are...edible! Candy floss pink, peppermint green, peachy peach, mellow buttercup yellow (maybe don't eat that one...). The hottest look is to colour block, or mix and match; you can even try a pastel maxi dress (Next has a fabulous range) with contrast colour sandals (see Figure 26).



Figure 26. Strappy jersey maxi dress from Next

This Posh Swaps blog post also provides an example of the reciprocal relationship that can occur between swappers and the administrators of a clothing swap website. Members of the website give their time, attention, and clothing to ensure the effectiveness of the online swapping process, and the site administrators give advice and fashion tips in return. As a result, members build stronger connections with the site.

Based on participants responses and observation of swap parties and websites, it is evident that swapping culture is founded on reciprocity, as givers become receivers and vice versa. Swappers must agree to give their fair share, but enjoy the benefit of receiving from others. This is the case in both the in-person and online swap environments. Moreover, the reciprocal nature of the swap extends beyond clothing items to include fashion information and advice, in as much as fashion leaders use swapping as a means of socializing with other fashion leaders.

Socializing and Swapping

For participants, the social component of clothing swaps is seen as an added benefit to acquiring new clothes, and this was evident in both the online and in-person swapping venues. Indeed, socializing seems to be a critical part of swapping. The swap context provides the opportunity to meet new people and perhaps even form relationships that extend beyond the swap itself. In particular, I observed that the clothing swap party seems to be as much about the party as it is about the swap.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, it is not uncommon for food to be a part of the clothing swap party. Food is used as a means of breaking the ice once everyone has gathered for the event. Individuals introduce themselves to those they may not have

known before the party, learn a little bit about each other, and perhaps engage in some “girl talk.” The goal is to make each participant comfortable and prepared for the swapping. Some clothing swap hosts take a more formal approach and implement exercises or games to facilitate socializing amongst the guests. For instance, Monica wanted to get conversation going between guests at her swap party. Before the swapping began, she asked each person to say her middle name and something interesting about herself that most people would be surprised to hear. Even though the group was fairly familiar with one another already, they still learned something new about each other, which helped to get everyone engaged in the process.

The socializing did not appear to stop once the swapping began. At each party, I observed that chatting and mingling occurs as each person chooses items. Oftentimes this leads to idea sharing. For example, at Tamara’s event, there were several wines and sparkling ciders available to drink. In the midst of the swapping, one participant said that she mixed the sparkling cider with a particular wine, and that the resulting taste was very good. This sparked conversation between the guests, and, soon after, others were trying the same drink combination. Some even talked about having this drink combination available for the next event. Instead of being a distraction to the swapping process, the dialogue was reflective of the exchange purpose of the event. Mackenzie explains the importance of socializing to the swap environment:

MC: It’s just fun because it’s socializing... and it’s a party that [has] a purpose. You know, it’s like we are going to chat and eat. But, we have a purpose of doing something together, and I think it develops a relationship.

Oftentimes, the social element of the clothing swap party can become so prominent that guests stay at the swap party long after the actual swapping ends. I observed this at Tonya's clothing swap party. Although her e-mail invitation stated that the party would be held from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m., guests continued socializing until nearly 9:30 p.m., two hours longer than anticipated. Interestingly, participants enjoyed the socializing so much that they did not even realize how much time had passed, as many, like Kenya, expressed surprise at what time it was when they left.

K: I actually had so much fun, as you can tell... because the clothing swap party was supposed to be from like 5:30 to 7:30... and we didn't get out of there till like a long time after. But, I had a lot of fun, and that's also shaped by like the people you're with. So, I think that we had fun together. We talked about everything.

Indeed, this group did talk quite a bit. One of the participants referred to it as "girl talk," which included sorority business, dating woes, and even exercise/weight loss tips. It is interesting to note that a few of the participants had only just met one another for the first time at the party. However, everyone seemed to warm up to each other quickly, to the extent that even quite personal information was being shared by some.

Socializing is not only critical to the in-person clothing swap party, but it is also important in the online clothing swap environment. Rehash, for instance, believes that the social aspect of swapping is such an important factor that they even include it in their slogan, "Rehash: An easy way to swap clothes, make friends, get answers, and help the environment." The fact that Rehash allows members to not just swap, but to make friends, speaks to the significance of the social aspect. At the core of the site's operations, the social aspect serves to strengthen the overall online swapping experience.

ThredUp's clothing swap website takes the focus on social connection to an even higher level. ThredUp specifically focuses on children's merchandise and has a strong following among parents. In addition to a very detailed and interactive website, ThredUp also maintains a blog. Based on the blog's "About Me" description, the goal of the blog is a place for "Busy moms to stay updated on company news." That is, the company wants to stay connected with the moms that are members. One way that ThredUp does this is through its "Meet The ThredUp Team" blog segment. This segment allows employees of the company to introduce themselves to ThredUp moms, and even share personal information and pictures. For example, Jenny's feature reads:

J: I've been working for thredUP for 2 years. I started at thredUP as an intern back when we were doing thredUP for adults. Then, we traded just adult shirts ... After we switched to thredUP kids, I became the full time customer service specialist. I moved with the company from Boston, MA to San Francisco, CA! Now I am the office manager of our office and a part time manager of our new warehouse... During my free time I like to hang out with my boyfriend, Hector, and take "glamour" shots of my new cat, Honey Badger. (The name is a long story...) Both are pictured below.... If you ever want to chat, feel free to shoot me an email at jenny@thredup.com.

As seen by Jenny's distinctly personal post, she connects herself with the ThredUp mothers who are loyal followers and users of the site. She even ends her post by including her e-mail for customers to personally contact her if they want to "chat." Essentially, by sharing details and photos of her personal life (see Figure 27), Jenny is seeking interaction with ThredUp moms, and, in turn, as customers, the moms develop a greater bond with the company and its site.



Figure 27. Jenny's cat

A mutual interest in learning more about each other surfaced frequently through the clothing exchange environment. Participants talked about how they value the ways that the environment allows them to meet new people, as expressed by Jasmine, “I will say that overall it was fun. It was great meeting new people. It’s [clothing swap party] a great way to meet new people.” Oftentimes, the relationships that are formed during clothing swap parties continue beyond the swap event. Participants talked about how people who were once strangers become friends through the social interaction afforded by a swap. Indeed, I often observed that, by the end of the party, guests were taking pictures with one another and modeling clothes for each other as if they were old friends.

In a similar vein, relationships appeared to be strengthened during the swapping events. That is, participants who may not be fully acquainted with one another before the party find they have some commonalities, and then decide to socialize even more outside

of the party. This was true for Marsha's clothing swap party, as Mackenzie and Marsha planned an outing for the week after the event. Mackenzie explains, "Like, now... this Sunday Marsha and I are gonna hang out. And she plans to wear my shoes, and I also plan to wear something that I got from the swap party. So, you know... like kind of a follow-up thing to see if we like the things that we got." Obviously, a stronger bond has been created between Marsha and Mackenzie, in that though they were acquainted before the swap party, the experience of it prompted them to decide to spend more time together. Thus, the swapping inspired further socializing.

In addition to meeting new people and socializing, Tamara's clothing swap party included a short presentation from Jasmine, who happened to be a Mary Kay representative. Jasmine took advantage of the group of ladies assembled for the swap to share with them the benefits of selling Mary Kay, and urge them to consider joining the network of Mary Kay women. Although her presentation appeared to distract people from the swapping purpose, surprisingly, it seemed to facilitate the social component of the party. Jasmine handed out product samples and after the party was over some of the guests even purchased a few items (see Figure 28). The "networking" continued when Jasmine asked for each person's e-mail address. Thus, through the fashion-focused nature of the swap party, Jasmine found new members for her Mary Kay network.



Figure 28. Jasmine's Mary Kay set-up displayed during the clothing swap party

It is clear from the data that socializing is a defining feature of the clothing swap experience. The social element supplements the swapping process, in both online and in-person swapping venues, as it is an opportunity for people to come together and share a common interest (fashion). Relationships are fostered because of the socializing, and networks can even evolve from the experience. Yet, swapping can also have its challenges, some of which actually stems from the social interaction involved.

Passing Judgment

Although all participants talked about benefits that arise from the clothing swap experience, some pointed to elements of swapping that were less positive. One issue that surfaced in participants' responses was the concern that they will be judged based on the items they bring to the swap party. That is, they feel pressure to bring the "right" items to swap and to appropriately represent themselves to others through the items they bring for exchange.

Concern about being judged was particularly prevalent during April's clothing swap party. This prevalence could stem from the fact that all attendees of this party were college freshman who seemed to rely heavily on each other's opinion. Based on what I observed, it was clear that each participant was apprehensive when hanging her items up for display. Some even made apologetic statements about their items when they viewed those brought by others, stating that they were not sure they had brought the right type of things. Participants explain the cause of their apprehension:

I: What was your reaction when you heard about this whole swapping thing?

M: I was like crap... I don't have cool clothes! (Laughter)

M: Yeah, that's what I was thinking... like, ohhhh gosh – they are going to judge my clothes.

I: Really?

J: Cause you don't want to give your good stuff away... but you wanna have, like, decent stuff to give away.

A: Yeah, that was kinda what I was saying. I didn't want to give my super expensive stuff away, but I still wanted like to give away cool, cute stuff that I still liked.

Participants at this clothing swap party seemed overly concerned with making the right impression. Because their clothing communicates who they are as an individual, they fear being judged harshly by their friends if they do not bring clothes that are fashionable enough.

While participants at the other clothing swap parties that I observed did not appear to be as self-conscious about items brought to swap, many still expressed concern about their donation choices. Realizing that others would evaluate their taste based upon the clothing they chose to give away, they wanted the clothing they brought to reflect positively on them. Hannah explains how this concern impacted what she chose to bring to the party:

H: I didn't bring some clothes with some stains or really like rough... 'cause if I brought those kinds of clothes to the party, I could feel, like, shame. Or, I [would] feel guilty. So, intentionally, I chose at least some good quality clothes.

Hannah does not want to run the risk of feeling ashamed, so she chose to bring only higher quality items to the party. In Hannah's mind, items of a higher quality level will keep her from being judged negatively by peers.

This need to be positively judged by one's peers also exists within the on-line swap environment. Online swappers must make sure that their photos and merchandise descriptions are appealing enough to attract the attention of other swappers. If the items are not sought after, then the member sits idle, waiting for someone to express an interest in swapping for their items. To keep this from happening, some of the veteran swappers share ways that others can make their merchandise more attractive. Such was the case in a Rehash.com post by seasoned swapper Kelly:

K: Not getting enough trade requests or interest in your items? Here are some pointers! First and foremost, how are your rehash images?! The image is the main attraction, so here's what you do:

(1.) Clean an area so you won't have clutter/loud background in your pictures. The best area is a nice clean stretch of floor, your bed or put a hook on your wall to display clothes on hangers. (2.) Use a neutral, solid-color background. It's really hard to focus on the item when your zebra print or tie-dye blanket (no matter how cute!) is the background! (3.) LIGHT! very important! Open all your curtains! Daytime is best! If it's night, turn on your lights and bring in others so the room is as well lit as possible. You want to AVOID using the FLASH on your camera if at all possible. (4.) Point and shoot! Get your item from a pleasing, tell-all angle. For a top, for example, take the picture from directly above so that the shape, color and details are all in one shot. Get the picture close enough to show detail – the item being showcased should make up at least 75% of the area of your picture! (5.) Use the macro setting on your camera (if possible) to zoom in on details/textures, etc. List the full view of the item first (as the main pic) and the rest after.

Based on Kelly's detailed "how-to" instructions, swappers who may just be starting the on-line swapping process can avoid being judged negatively because their items are poorly displayed. By following Kelly's advice, their items will likely seem more appealing. Not following her pointers may mean that others will use them as an example of poor posting. Indeed, some swappers publicly express their judgments, as exhibited by Reva's post about her online swapping pet peeves:

R: ... (1.) Items listed with no picture and no avatar (Makes me feel like I can't trust them...) (2.) Inaccurately described items (3.) Generally non-descriptive titles which makes it hard to view rehashes w/o clicking on everything (4.) People who list cool stuff and then never log back on making it impossible for me to get those items I like!

Participants also talked about how they decided whether an item was "swap party worthy" or if it should go to someplace like Goodwill. Indeed, when asked to explain their decision-making process, comparisons between Goodwill quality clothing and swap

quality clothing were most important. For example, Tracy describes how she decided what to bring to the swap party:

T: I kind of skimmed my closet and looked for things that I haven't worn – I guess within the past 6 months or so... And then I started looking at things that were new – and then if I hadn't worn them in the past 6 months – would I regret giving them away. Uh, and then also knowing the people that were coming, and trying to think...you know, would those people really want those items. Were they worth swapping with somebody – or were they just Goodwill items?

I: So how do you tell the difference from what's swap party worthy and what's Goodwill worthy?

T: I guess the quality of it. Like some things are just worn... and I guess the quality of it too as far as what the item is. Like, is it something that I just bought to lounge in... or was it even in style anymore?

For Tracy, consideration of the individuals who will be attending the party is important. Perceptions of how these individuals will judge her items helps her decide what is to be swapped versus what should be given away to charity. Items that are too worn, of lesser quality, or are out of style go to Goodwill instead of with her to the swapping event.

Overall, participants did not want to be embarrassed by items they have purchased in their past shopping trips. Although swappers bring items that no longer appeal to them, this does not mean that they can bring just anything. If participants are not careful, they run the risk of being ridiculed by their peers. Kenya explains how she tries to avoid this:

K: When you go to swap parties, you get some ideas. You get to see people's styles. Now, of course the opposite side of that is that, you know, there might be some things that you own that you wish you never got in the first place. And...

you know people are judging you like... “Kenya where did you get that?” “Why you got a House of Dereon bright orange blazer?” You know, something that just didn’t work. In that case, I would take it to Goodwill instead of showing it to ya’ll.

Purchases that Kenya is ashamed of will not be shared with her clothing swap peers.

Instead, they are donated to Goodwill, as unlike a swap with other fashion leaders, the Goodwill does not pose a social risk to Kenya.

On the whole, participants view the clothing swap experience as a positive one, with one challenge being the social risk that accompanies choosing the items they will bring to the swap. Ultimately, fear of transgression keeps the swap standard high, as most participants think that bringing just anything to a swapping event would not be appropriate. Some items brought to a swap or posted to an online swap site will of course be more popular than others, and particularly if the item is a one-of-a-kind or designer brand. However, the key is to avoid sending the wrong message about one’s taste or fashion judgments.

Talking Brands

According to the participants, brands do play a role in the swapping experience. Although participants did not necessarily look for certain brands at swaps, when brands are available they are generally sought after. On some level, brands offer a level of exclusivity, and gaining access to them via the clothing swap venue is highly valued. Two factors related to brands emerged from the data as important within the swap context: (a) *Brand Consciousness* and (b) *Brand Access*. Both are discussed in the following sections.

Brand Consciousness

As discussed in Chapter IV, participants have a strong desire to be in the know regarding fashion. As such, they are distinctly aware of various designers and apparel brands. Participants can also identify the particular aesthetic associated with a fashion retailer, and know exactly when various designer collections are available. It was interesting to see that though participants are cognizant of such factors, they did not necessarily seek out brands and designer items within the clothing swap venue.

However, when well-known apparel brands appeared at a swap, participants clearly took notice. As Jasmine explains, “You know, most people are not getting rid of higher brand items at these swap parties, unfortunately. However, there have been times when I found some really great diamonds in the rough.” Jasmine does not expect to see upscale brands in the clothing swap environment, yet when she does, she considers them to be valuable finds.

Given participants’ brand consciousness, some felt obligated to choose a brand if and when they come across it during the clothing swap. It is precisely because it is uncommon that they feel they should take advantage of the opportunity. As Mackenzie explains,

MC: I just think that sometimes... I think it just feels, I would say... like a pressure to have [that brand]. I mean, it’s a brand name that you usually have to pay a lot [for]. But now, you don’t have to pay. You know, [I feel I] I should have it, unless I don’t like the design.

Mackenzie feels compelled to choose the branded item, particularly given that she is aware of the brand’s retail cost. It is almost as though her brand consciousness dictates

her decision-making. The only “out” Mackenzie gives herself is if she does not like the specific design of the item. Otherwise, she feels she should choose the branded merchandise when swapping.

At times, on-line swappers also appear to be driven by brand consciousness. Many openly express their preference for certain brands and will seek out these brands from other swappers who also value them. This is evident in the following request by Jessica. A Swapstyle.com member, Jessica is looking for more styles of her favorite brand of jeans:

J: Hey guys! My wardrobe is stuffed full with true religion jeans that I’m rather bored with and was looking to trade for other pairs. They are all size 24 and are in great condition, not hemmed or altered in any way.

Here’s what I have:

- True Religion Joey Super Midnight Stitch in Dark Lovestruck
- True Religion Joey Super Yellow Stitch in Dark Drifter
- True Religion Emma in Dark Drifter
- True Religion Emma in Dark Lovestruck

I have more LOL, if anyone is interested or wants pics, just let me know!

Julia’s brand knowledge is detailed enough to specify the style, color, and cut of the jeans that she believes her fellow members can identify with. Moreover, they engage in a kind of “brand talk” that only those who are True Religion jean wearers would be able to understand.

Observation of the swap parties also revealed instances of brand consciousness. On a few occasions, participants would browse through the items and show an initial interest in something, but once they recognized that there was a brand attached to it, their interest would noticeably increase. They would sometimes even yell out the brand name,

almost in shock, to announce to the group that this was a good find. Marsha reiterates the importance that branded clothing tends to have at a swap party:

M: Maybe you liked it a little bit. But [once you knew] it had a brand name on it, you would like it more. And, there is no explanation for that that I can think of – other than the brand name. People know it! A couple of times when people picked up items or brand names... I don't know if they would have picked it up if it didn't have the brand on it. The brand added more value to those items.

It is clear that participants are conscious of apparel brand names and instinctively gravitate toward them during their decision-making. I observed this notion during Marsha's clothing swap party. Marsha's guest Hannah, in particular, seemed to be more brand-conscious than others. Quite often, I observed Hannah looking at the labels in apparel, accessories, and shoes to further consider the appeal of an item (see Figure 29).



Figure 29. Hannah assessing an item and its label

Participants also received positive confirmation about their swap decisions via the brand. That is, participants seemed confident in the item they selected once they knew it was a brand. I observed that, at first, many of the participants were focused on the design or color of an item, but once they realized it was a recognized brand, this knowledge confirmed the selection. Mackenzie describes how this applied to her selection of an Isaac Mizrahi dress (see Figure 30):

MC: First, I looked at the dress and I was like, yeah... I love the dress. I love the white and its kind of lace. But then, when I know that it's a brand name... I feel like ohhhhh, yeah, I really want to have it...

Mackenzie admits that she was initially drawn to the dress because of the color and fabric, but once she became aware of the brand, she was certain that she made the right choice:

MC: I always believe that people usually would look for the style or the item that catches their eyes in terms of design. But, when they know the brand... it kind of confirms the things that guarantee that it's worth it. Like, the worth to have it.



Figure 30. Mackenzie modeling the Isaac Mizrahi dress

From Mackenzie's perspective, the brand name gives a particular item additional worth. In this case, the brand provides added value to the garment and this value assures her that she made a good decision. Hannah agrees with this notion, and thinks of brands as a kind of marker of credibility, "I think brand is performing as kind of [a] credible source. It justifies the price or quality." In other words, Hannah believes that a well-known brand name tells you that a swap garment is probably more expensive and is of a higher quality.

Interestingly, participants often talked about choosing branded garments without even realizing it. Jasmine explains how this happened to her:

JS: I did notice when I got home from the swap party... there were like three items in my bag that were Banana Republic. So, I think that I just gravitate more towards certain designers or certain labels.

At first Jasmine did not notice that she selected several Banana Republic items. However, when she realized what she had done, it made sense to her, given her preferences for the retailer's clothing styles.

Brand Access

The clothing swap venue can operate as a kind of gateway for access to well-known brands. As discussed, it is rather rare for a high-end brand to surface at a swap. However, on occasion, certain brands do become available, which gives swappers a kind of inside access to brands that they may not want to pay retail prices for. This is especially beneficial because, as students, many of the participants talked about having limited budgets. Even if these items were available in a consignment shop venue, they still may not be able to afford them. Jasmine explains how, thanks to the "brand access" afforded by swaps, she has acquired some good brands: "I'm always looking for that label or that designer that I may not otherwise be able to afford... It's exciting... I'm like "Wow, somebody's getting rid of Trina Turk!" Jasmine obviously has a disposition for branded clothing. However, paying full price for these items is not an option. Thus, she welcomes the opportunity to get a free branded item like Trina Turk, because this allows her to have the satisfaction of obtaining a brand she likes without having to pay for it.

The notion of brand access is also as prevalent in the online swap realm, and particularly in my observation of the swapping website ThredUp.com. As mentioned, ThredUp.com is a swapping website that targets kid's items, and includes children's clothing, toys, and books. The website allows parents to bundle various items together in boxes and then offer them for swapping with other parents based on the age and size of their children. Oftentimes, parents commented on how the site allowed them to secure branded items for their children that would normally be out of their budgets. Anna explains this on her ThredUp post, "There's quality, brand name clothing [on the website] that would cost me twice as much to buy elsewhere." Interestingly, this brand preference is also seen for items that are not solely for kid's use, as parents sometimes exchange items that are used only by other parents. As a matter of fact, when the website's administrators asked for feedback about ThredUp's swappers' favorite boxes that they have received, ThredUp mother Karson posted about one box she received that included branded, expensive items, "My very first Thredup box contained a Moby and a manual Medela breast pump that I use daily. I've received a bunch of awesome boxes but I literally use the pump multiple times a day!" Although Karson has received many items from her ThredUp swaps, the branded items are the most valuable.

Swappers also make brand-specific requests every now and then within the forums. I observed this on Rehash, as Naomi posted a request for a certain brand of shoes for her prom: "Anyone have any Louboutins that they want to trade? Hi guys, my prom is a few weeks away and I'm looking for a pair of Louboutins (Sz 36.5-37.5)." Gaining access to a free pair of Christian Louboutins is a tall order, especially

considering the average retail price is around \$500. However, her request provides indication that even high-end designer brands can be acquired through swaps.

Access to brands is also relevant from the exclusivity perspective. For instance, Hannah is originally from a country where certain brands are not available. She is aware of specific American designer brands, but they are scarce. Thus, the clothing swap party experience allows her access to the American brands that she has always wanted, which makes them even more exclusive. As Hannah explains,

H: Yeah, I think brand is important. Isaac Mizrahi is not common in my home country in my city... I could only see Isaac Mizrahi clothes on TV or in a magazine. Like runway clothes, but there are not like stores... like real stores of Isaac Mizrahi clothes.

I: So, since you don't have those stores you are more interested in the item?

H: Yeah... 'cause it's scarce.

The scarcity of the item makes the brand name more appealing to her. In her country few consumers would have access to certain brand name items, so acquiring them sets her apart from others.

Summary

As described in this chapter, clothing swap culture has its own rules and procedures for facilitating exchange, while allowing swappers to connect in a personal way through the give and take that is required of swapping. This focus on reciprocation was observed not only during in-person swaps, but also in the online swap environment. Through the social nature of swaps, behaviors that strengthen the group are seen, as

fashion leaders seek validation from others regarding their clothing choices. Thus, through the exchange of styles, information, ideas, and knowledge, fashion leaders can reinforce their identities via the group as a whole. In the next chapter, I examine the broader significance of the overall thematic interpretation for understanding fashion leadership and group membership and consider the key findings of the interpretation relative to the literature.

CHAPTER VII

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Interpreting the experiences of the participants helps to better understand how their identities as fashion leaders are maintained through the group and, conversely, how membership in the group confirms this identity. Synthesizing the experiences of the participants, and particularly within the exchange environment, sheds light on what it means to be a fashion leader. Likewise, the interpretation of the online and in-person clothing exchange experience reveals the role that swaps play in the development and maintenance of fashion consumer group identity.

In this chapter, the conceptual relevance of the thematic interpretation is explained. This chapter is divided into four parts: (1) *Fashion as a Lifestyle*, (2) *Fashion as a Social Experience*, (3) *Clothing Swaps as an Emerging Consumption Experience*, and (4) *A Matter of Brand*. Issues that were discussed in Chapter II as important to shaping the study are examined in light of the thematic interpretation, and findings are considered relative to the broader research goals and objectives that guide the study.

In the first part of the chapter, factors that emerged as important to the fashion leadership experience are explained through discussion of specific behaviors that are used by participants to signify fashion leadership. In this section, I examine what it means to

be a fashion leader and explore fashion as an everyday lived experience that these consumers have in common.

In the second part of this chapter, I explore the connections between identification and group membership. Employing Tajfel & Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory, I discuss how participants establish group distinctiveness through specific clothing-related behaviors which communicate and reinforce their membership in the fashion leadership consumer group. Specifically, I examine how fashion knowledge is communicated through the group, and consider the ways that fashion is largely a social experience, particularly as seen within the swap context.

In the third part of this chapter, I examine clothing swaps as an increasingly popular mode of clothing acquisition and disposal, and the swap experience as a context for facilitating fashion consumer group identity (and specifically fashion leadership). Both in-person and online swaps are considered, as both serve as a vehicle for group interaction and individual decision-making. Motivations for swapping are considered, as well as the ways that swapping broadens the traditional notion of exchange.

Last, I examine the role brand plays in the fashion leadership experience, and how this is exhibited within the in-person and online swapping environments. Both environments highlight how brands are used by fashion leaders to establish group membership and identity. I conclude by discussing how the emergent interpretation addressed the two key questions posed by the study's conceptual framework.

Fashion as a Lifestyle

For the participants in this study, fashion is a way of life. As the thematic interpretation reveals, fashion leadership requires a commitment to maintaining a high level of awareness of trends and anything related to fashion change. As fashion leaders, staying connected to trends helps participants to make the style choices that communicate their identity as fashion leaders to others. They rely on dress to set themselves apart from others, and do so by finding items that others may not have, or using clothing that is widely accessible in unique or different ways. Two aspects of their fashion-centered, everyday experiences emerged as relevant to the literature on fashion consumer groups: (1) *Communicating Fashion Leadership* and (2) *Approaches to Acquisition*. Both are discussed in turn in the following sections.

Communicating Fashion Leadership

Each participant engages in specific behaviors designed to establish and maintain the image of a fashion leader. Participants choose clothing to convey a self that is fashionable, and, in particular, a self that uses clothing in unique ways to shape a fashion-driven, yet distinctive identity. Indeed, expressing individuality emerged as a significant part of the fashion leadership experience among participants. The interpretation highlights how, as fashion leaders, participants seek clothing that represents their own unique fashion-related identity, as this aids them in achieving their goals for self-expression. For example, Monica considers herself to be so distinctive that she even calls her clothing “ugly.” Yet, it is the fact that the clothing is “ugly” that makes it more appealing to her. For Monica, the ugliness translates into a distinctive style that is

appreciated by only a few. Monica considers herself to be so different that she labels her diverse taste in music, movies, and overall interests as “strange.” These peculiarities are something that she values about her personality, so she deliberately uses her clothing choices in an attempt to communicate them to others. Monica’s behaviors signal to others that she is a fashion leader (Hirschman & Adcock, 1978).

Participants, as fashion leaders, deliberately use unique styles to express the unique self. For example, Jaime has clothing that is off limits to her friends because she feels that these items establish her identity as unique. She takes pride in the fact that she has not seen anyone else wearing these items, as they differentiate her from others. If someone else wears an item that Jaime is known for wearing, then her identity as a fashion leader is threatened. In other words, because the item is no longer unique, Jaime is no longer unique. Defined as “a positive striving for abnormality relative to other people” (Snyder & Fromkin, 1977, p. 518), fashion leaders emphasize uniqueness in their style of dress, and this uniqueness, in turn, reinforces their identities as fashion leaders. Wearing uncommon items, or common items in uncommon ways, helps to maintain an image of someone who is aware of, and in many cases ahead of, the trend. Moreover, if the trends they wear are adopted by others, participants, as fashion leaders, indicate that they will stop wearing them in order to maintain their uniqueness (Workman & Kidd, 2000).

Tian, Bearden, and Hunter (2001) provide a conceptual definition of uniqueness as “a trait of pursuing differentness relative to others through the acquisition, utilization, and disposition of consumer goods for the purpose of developing and enhancing one’s

self-image and social image” (Tian et al., 2001, p. 52). As the present study indicates, participants’ behaviors support this definition, in as much as they seek clothing that is unique and use it to express the differentness of the self. Tian et al.’s (2001) behavioral dimension of uniqueness known as “avoidance of similarity,” which involves the loss of interest in an item because that item is now commonplace to others, surfaced repeatedly in the study. The notion of avoiding similarity was embraced by many participants who took certain measures to avoid “copy-cats,” or someone who is wearing the same thing at the same time. Participants purposely shopped boutiques, thrift stores, and vintage stores for one-of-a-kind items or limited offerings in order to maintain their uniqueness. For Jaime, seeing a “copy-cat” devalues her clothing, and her ability to use it to be different, “It’s just like darn... I don’t have a cool shirt anymore! She has it too!” When other people wear what Jaime wears, she is no longer unique and therefore no longer a fashion leader.

As seen in the interpretation, being well-informed about all aspects of fashion is central to the fashion leadership experience. Given this, participants seek out a variety of information sources to stay ahead of others. Participants talked about this need to stay connected to fashion as intrinsic to the fashion leadership experience, and that researching trends is part of their fashion-centric lifestyles. Interestingly, this study revealed that participants are not just interested in the information, but they actively use it to perfect their “fashion skills.” That is, fashion resources aid them in creating their distinctive styles. For participants, as clothing is more than something to wear, it is put together in such a way to form an overall aesthetic experience. Participants have the

skills to find different items of clothing, whether at thrift, fast-fashion, or discount venues, and put these items together in ways that communicate their fashion know-how. In other words, they use their fashion skills to create a unique style, and conversely use this style to express their fashion skills.

It is important to note that participants' skills have evolved over time. That is, many admitted to not always being "good at fashion." However, through time devoted to keeping up with fashion, they have developed the skills necessary to express themselves as fashion leaders. Participants use sources like fashion magazines, blogs, and even celebrities to stay current with emerging trends, as well as references for putting together their own looks. Jasmine in particular talked about using magazines as manuals for recreating looks. She may not be able to afford to buy the same brands that are shown in the magazine, but she has the skills to interpret that trend through clothing that she can afford.

JS: I love it [*InStyle* magazine] because it's like a one-stop shop. Like, ... everything is in there. It talks about trends in beauty and it has your sections of what's out now and at different price categories – and it goes all the way from low end pricing to very high end pricing. So, even if I might not be able to get it – I can at least dream [laughter]... and I can recreate the look for less.

This finding supports Workman and Caldwell (2007), who suggest that fashion leaders rely heavily on sources of information such as fashion magazines, and that this reliance is a character trait of more importance among fashion leaders than among other consumer groups. The present study adds to this idea, however, as it reveals the extent to which

such sources are used in the development of fashion leaders' skills relative to their use of dress.

Participants' experiences clearly point to the use of dress as a means of expressing individuality, and how this individuality communicates to others that they are fashion leaders. Data show how it takes both time and effort to be able to use clothing in this way, and not just in terms of choosing what to wear. Participants also devote a great deal of time and attention to choosing what to buy.

Approaches to Acquisition

The interpretation of data points to the variety of ways fashion leaders shop for clothing. Although each participant has her own particular shopping process, they all approach it with a sense of purpose. Overall, it is the purpose that determines where each chooses to shop. For instance, participants Tamara and Monica approach their shopping process for the purposes of relaxation and fun. Tamara states, "I may just wanna go in and look and not buy anything," as curiosity is what motivates her to shop. Similarly, for Monica, the experience of shopping is the priority: "I rarely go to a store with a plan about what I am going to buy... because shopping is like a fun experience." For them, the shopping process is not about leaving the mall with a specific garment. In other words, the outcome of shopping is not as important as the experience of shopping.

In contrast, other participants approach clothing shopping with a specific purchase goal in mind, driven by a specific want, need, or particular occasion. Some, like April, even go to the trouble of researching whether a store has a particular item before physically taking a trip to the store:

A: Um, I usually make a list of things I want... and then I'll go online and look at the stores that I know... like where I am going in the mall and see if they have what I am looking for.

Like April, participants that desire this type of shopping experience have a purpose that is more functional, as their shopping motivations are utilitarian in nature. They are focused on a particular need, at a particular time, and rarely consider options that fall outside of that need.

Fashion leaders employ a variety of methods to develop the skills they use to express their individuality, including selecting stores that offer merchandise that can be used to create a style that sets them apart from others. Indeed, the interpretation highlights how, as fashion leaders, participants shop at varied types of stores, ranging from boutique, vintage/thrift/consignment, to fast-fashion, and discount stores. Although they may have a preference for a certain type of store, most shop at a combination of store types to broaden the scope of potential choices. This versatility was reflected in how participants talked about their own "style." For example, Monica states:

M: I don't know if there's just one word... I have so many multiple styles because in different seasons I am into different styles. I know I love the Bohemian look, as evidenced in the outfit I have on today. But then I also like the socialite, classic look, which is why I have a lot of blazers like this and little overlays like this. And then, I even like the preppy look.

Monica uses a variety of stores in order to create the various looks she describes, and each store serves a particular purpose in the process. For example, she describes herself as a "thrifter," and frequently shops these stores for one-of-a-kind items that clearly communicate her identity as a fashion leader to others. She feels these items provide an

authenticity that clothing from mass retailers does not provide. By the same token, however, Monica also shops at fast-fashion stores. She feels these stores provide benefits that are different from thrift stores, in that they offer the latest trends:

M: [You go to] Forever 21 if you want the latest looks. They change their layout, like, every other day. So, if you really want something and you're really wanting that look now, you can go to Forever 21 and get it.

Monica has the skills to make a myriad of types of clothing work together in ways that become her own. Thus, being able to shop a wide variety of stores to acquire clothing, which she then puts together in unique ways, supports her identity as a fashion leader.

In a similar vein, it is important for fashion leaders to remain aware of stores where they can acquire the unique merchandise they desire. Their constant use of magazines, blogs and other media outlets to stay abreast of fashion helps them to stay aware of different shopping alternatives, but their peers also serve as an information source for this type of knowledge. Thus, they will often reach out to other fashion leaders, in-person and online, to get advice or recommendations about stores. An example of this was observed on Rehash.com, where one member sought feedback from others about where to shop online:

K: For those who shop online, what's your favorite site to shop on?

KI: I like Zappos, Lucky Brand, Ruche and Modcloth. I'm thinking about trying Synergy clothing, but not 100% sure yet.

A: Etsy!!

The online swap site becomes a means of sharing fashion acquisition information. This sharing may create awareness of new sites, and therefore increased exposure to a broader range of acquisition options.

Clearly, fashion leadership requires versatility and flexibility, along with the creative vision to combine multiple elements that result in varied style outcomes (Goldsmith, Flynn, & Moore, 1996; Sproles, 1989; Workman & Caldwell, 2007). To some extent, the literature indicates that these skills are the hallmark of a fashion leader (Workman & Johnson, 1993). However, this dissertation extends the examination of such skills into the swap environment – a context that has thus far been overlooked.

As discussed in the thematic interpretation, a primary benefit of swapping is that participants are able to acquire clothing for free. Moreover, participants feel they can “trust” this clothing because it is coming from their peers. Participants see this as a better way of acquiring second-hand clothing, as explained by Mackenzie, “...Sometimes when I go to Goodwill, I’m not 100% sure about the cleanliness and who has worn this before.” Thus, perceptions of an added benefit of acquiring clothing from known sources expands our general understanding of fashion leaders’ motivations for second-hand clothing acquisition (Albinsson & Perera, 2009).

Participants also view the swapping environment as a means to acquire items that are distinctive. That is, the fact that other fashion leaders are at the swapping events guarantees that the merchandise exchanged will be unique. This guarantee, in turn, creates excitement about the possibility of having access to items that can be used to express their uniqueness as fashion leaders. This notion was observed during a clothing

swap party where one-of-a-kind shoes that originated from Thailand were brought for exchange. All of the guests showed great interest in the shoes, and discussed how they would not be able to find shoes of this variety outside of the swapping venue. Ultimately, only one participant at the party could fit in the shoes, and she was very excited about acquiring them, as she felt that they represented her unique personality.

Similarly, the use of the swapping venue to acquire unique items can also be seen in the online swap. For instance, PoshSwaps.com features vintage merchandise on their website, such as a vintage earring holder from the 1980s. Clearly, this type of merchandise gives fashion leaders a new venue to acquire one-of-a-kind items that might not be available to them in the traditional retail environment. Thus, swapping, whether in-person or online, aids fashion leaders in acquiring more exclusive merchandise, which in turn supports their goal of communicating their individuality to others.

Fashion is the dominant force operating within participants' lives, and is obviously a lifestyle that they share in common with each other. As consumers, these fashion leaders are driven by a need to stay closely connected to trends and emerging styles and use this information to express their own individuality through dress. They draw from a range of stores and mix and match pieces to create the styles they use to communicate their uniqueness. Moreover, as this study shows, they use the clothing swap in a similar manner, as it allows them to acquire unique items from other fashion leaders. Yet the swap provides them with other benefits, and particularly those of a more social nature, as is discussed in the next section.

Fashion as a Social Experience

As discussed earlier in this chapter, fashion leaders seek to communicate their fashion abilities to others. Participants in this study do so by deliberately using dress to communicate their uniqueness as individuals. Yet, as this study reveals, much of the experience of being a fashion leader means being a part of a group of like-minded individuals. That is, engaging in identification with other fashion leaders. Through this identification, fashion leaders categorize themselves as different from others who are not fashion leaders, and rely on members of the group to uphold this distinction, pointing to the important role of others in the process of communicating fashion leadership. To that end, three areas of focus emerged from the interpretation that articulate the social forces that drive fashion leadership behavior and particularly as this behavior plays out in the swap context: (1) *Identification with the Group*, (2) *There is No “I” in Swap*, and (3) *Social Swapping versus Social Shopping*. Each is discussed in detail within the following sections.

Identification with the Group

According to Solomon (2009), identification occurs when a person develops an attitude to conform to a group's expectations. The thematic interpretation provides several examples of the way that participants, as fashion leaders, think of themselves as belonging to a specific group. Although in most cases participants did not explicitly define themselves as members of a group, they made repeated references to friends, acquaintances, and others with whom they felt a commonality via fashion. In other words, fashion leadership requires identification with others who use clothing similarly,

thereby forming a group of consumers who think about and behave similarly with respect to fashion.

Fashion is at the core of the group. Moreover, the “fashion-ability” of the group’s members establishes its identity relative to other groups. Participants repeatedly sought to adopt trends in order to articulate their group membership, as adopting trends before the general population proves to others within the group that they belong in it. Similarly, this adoption communicates their membership to others who are outside of the group. As a result, participants often felt pressure to embrace trends as a way to show their “credibility” as fashion leaders. In some cases, they will embrace a trend even when they perceive it as too extreme. For instance, Marsha purchased a dress that she has never worn and still sits idle in her closet. She bought the dress because she was initially very attracted to the trend. However, she has yet to wear it, and explains, “Like, it’s one of my faves, but I haven’t worn it because maybe it’s too fashionable or too out there...” However, even though Marsha has not worn the dress, the fact that she purchased it and possesses it helps her maintain her group membership, as it signals her identification with other fashion leaders through her knowledge of trends.

April described feeling a similar pressure to adopt trends, albeit a little less overt. During April’s closet interview, she pointed out her favorite boots. Although she loves them and wears them often, she was not very taken with them in the beginning, buying them simply to keep from being seen as behind a trend: “I guess the whole combat boot thing was really in in the fall. And so, I was like... well, I need to be trendy and keep up with everybody else – so, I got these.”

A key finding revealed by the interpretation is that even though they exhibit similar behaviors relative to fashion, all fashion leaders are not the same. That is, while all participants are driven to know about trends, they are not all interested in wearing them. According to the diffusion of innovations literature, individuals adopt innovations or fashions at different speeds (Beaudoin, Lachance, & Robitaille, 2003; Cavusoglu, Hu, Li & Ma, 2010; Greve, 2009). Thus, depending on a fashion novelty's diffusion cycle, consumers may accept the novelty at different times, even among consumers within the same diffusion cycle segment. According to the bell-shaped curve of fashion diffusion (see Figure 3, p. 30), fashion leaders generally adopt a trend soon after it is introduced to the market. Yet, as the data revealed, this adoption may not occur at the same time for all fashion leaders. Moreover, as seen in participants' responses, fashion leaders may adopt a trend because they feel social pressure and desire to maintain their group membership rather than because they feel it suits them personally. In other words, they purchase and/or wear the trend because they do not want to run the risk of no longer being seen as fashion-forward enough by other group members.

The data also reveal the extent to which participants maintain their group membership by sharing styles with one another. This sharing stems from the fact that group members identify with each other as representatives of what is new and different in fashion. Yet, through this sharing, the group's identity is also maintained. Style sharing happens both deliberately and by accident. That is, sometimes fashion leaders share styles with each other through fashion-related suggestions, while other times styles are shared through more subtle forms of influence. As Jaime explained,

J: I feel like the more you hang out with certain people, the more you kind of... you don't copy their stuff... but, you kind of like – I don't know. It just kind of rubs off on you.

Because fashion is a social phenomenon, style sharing is inherent to the overall experience, whether intentional or not. In fact, April, discussed how her fashion leadership evolved during her first year in college because, as a fashion major, she felt confident in taking risks with her appearance, a behavior that is expected of fashion leaders. This is an important finding of this study, in that while the fashion leadership literature explains behaviors of fashion leaders as a group, and particularly with respect to adoption rates, it does not consider how members of the group share styles and style information as a means of identification with each other and with the group. Specifically, the interpretation illustrates how fashion leaders rely on a fashion-oriented, reciprocal relationship with each other that serves to reinforce their group membership as fashion leaders.

On occasion this relationship might involve specific apparel brands. As discussed in Chapter I, a brand signals that a product has specific attributes and qualities (Keller, 1993). In this study, brands were not found to be central to group membership or identity. Instead, brands serve as a tool used by fashion leaders to achieve a desired outcome. That is, a particular brand may be used in a way that expresses fashion leadership; however, brands are not necessarily a requirement to accomplish the desired outcome. Monica further expresses this sentiment:

M: I don't look for labels at all. I really don't think it matters... Like, as long as you can be cute. I think that's all that actually matters. I have a whole bunch of

name brand shoes and stuff like that, but it's not like I try to just look for [name brand] shoes like that...

For Monica, her desired outcome is to look “cute.” If name brand items, such as the shoes she purchased, aid her in this outcome, then she will buy them. However, she does not specifically seek out branded merchandise.

At the same time, the interpretation revealed that some apparel retail brands are highly regarded among fashion leaders, in particular Forever 21, H&M, and Urban Outfitters. However, due to the style versatility they seek, most do not seem to limit themselves to wearing only these brands. Yet, it should be noted how frequently they mentioned Forever 21. Participants associated Forever 21 with the latest trends. That is, the apparel brand provides a number of clothing options, all of which are on trend. Exemplifying the idea of socially negotiated brand meaning (Ligas & Cotte, 1999), Forever 21 held the strongest attraction for participants, in as much as the retailer seemed to anticipate this group's diverse, fashion-forward needs by offering them a wide array of affordable choices.

Kim and Kwon (2011) investigated the depths to which consumers establish interpersonal relationships with brands. They argue that consumers bond with some brands so deeply that they consider these brands to be “soulmates.” Consumers trust that soulmate brands will consistently meet their needs, yet because the connection is so intense, these brands are allowed to make mistakes, such as in quality or aesthetic presentation (Kim & Kwon, 2011). It was clear that this is the case for Forever 21, as almost all participants mentioned that the brand has quality issues. Yet, the pros

appeared to outweigh the cons, as participants also thought that the retailer's trend-driven offerings made it easy to overlook quality issues. Marsha discusses the value the group places on Forever 21 and why:

MA: The brand adds more value to those items... and then we still kind of talked about Forever 21. To us, it [Forever 21] is still like a brand even though it's like cheap. You know, whatever it is about Forever 21... we still value it, even though it's cheap.

Participants forgave the brand for its cheapness because they can rely on it to keep them up to date with the latest trends. This finding has implications for understanding how fashion leaders identify with brand and, in this case, connect rather strongly to a retail brand. Moreover, it illustrates how a retail brand aids fashion leaders in categorizing themselves as a distinctive group.

There is No “I” in Swap

Participants value the social element of fashion and fashion leadership, and this clearly emerged in the context of the clothing swap. Swaps provide an opportunity to build relationships (whether real or virtual) through the common denominator of fashion, which strengthens group membership and identification among fashion leaders. The social component of swapping took particular precedence at the in-person parties, wherein acquaintances become trusted “girlfriends” fairly quickly. As mentioned in Chapter VI, guests of one party remained long after the swapping ended to continue the “fashion talk.” Indeed, social interaction frames the entire event from beginning to end, with the swapping happening in-between.

As highlighted in the interpretation, everyone involved in the swap has a role to play and is expected to contribute something. With respect to the in-person swap party, the host has primary responsibility for creating the social environment. However, guests must also do their part to ensure that swapping can take place by bringing items worthy of exchange. In the online swapping environment, this responsibility is particularly important as the overall experience can be hindered if swappers do not contribute the agreed upon merchandise. As items are swapped, whether online or in-person, social ties are forged through a give and take, reciprocal dynamic. Indeed one person alone cannot swap, as it takes at least two.

A sense of camaraderie clearly exists via swapping, and, as a result, swappers do not think of each other as random individuals. Instead, they are “sister swappers,” and a successful swapping experience cannot be achieved unless members interact with each other in a socially appropriate manner. As a result, swap groups are often considered as communities of sorts, and especially within the online swapping environment. For instance, Rehash.com has an area on the website that features forums, groups, and public galleries, which can be accessed by clicking on the “community” tab, as they consider members of Rehash.com to be a part of their swapping “community.” Shared interests, values, and behaviors among members help to foster the social dynamic of swapping, which, in turn, reinforces the community. This social dynamic can be seen in how members fondly refer to themselves as “Rehashionistas,” and discuss particular behaviors that signify an authentic group membership:

A: You know you're a Rehashionista when...

K: On any given day you're wearing at least one item you got in a swap.

AN: While shopping you think about the things you're buying in terms of how marketable they'll be on Rehash if you decide you don't want them later...

B: You buy stuff just to rehash it. Everything I listed in the past 2 days I bought for the site specifically! Plus, about 6-7 other pieces that I decided to keep for myself!

Through Rehash.com, these individuals have formed a social bond that extends to include the site itself and what it means for their identity as a group. They find themselves wearing swapped items on an everyday basis, and even shop with Rehash.com in mind. Indeed, they no longer shop just for items that might be appropriate for themselves, they also consider how items might benefit the greater Rehash.com group.

Such "Rehashionista" behavior can in part be explained by Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and its four components of *social identity*, *social categorization*, *social comparison*, and *group distinctiveness*. For example, joining the Rehash.com website reflects both *social identity* and *social categorization*. Becoming a member of a swapping website involves the ordering of one's social environment by joining a group, while at the same time augmenting one's self-concept by gaining membership into that group. In other words, an individual who joins the site begins to categorize herself as a "swapper," which, in turn, adds an additional dimension to her identity. Although direct comparisons to other groups are not necessarily seen on Rehash, it is clear that there is some *social comparison* exhibited by these women, as they indirectly compare themselves to others by naming themselves "Rehashionistas," and setting themselves

apart from others who are not a part of this group. Lastly, *group distinctiveness* is defined by the characteristics and attributes assigned to the group by its members through their posts, such as shopping with swapping in mind. Moreover, as “Rehashionsitas,” a sense of identification with one another results in group norms that further support the group’s interests as a whole (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Social Swapping versus Social Shopping

Although some research suggests an inclination toward social shopping motivations among fashion leaders (Baumgarten, 1975; Goldsmith, Heitmeyer, & Freiden, 1991), none have examined how this motivation plays out within the clothing exchange environment. Interpretation of the data revealed how fashion leaders use clothing swaps not just to exchange apparel, but to share style information and fashion ideas. Although they use clothing to express their uniqueness as individuals, they also use each other as barometers for what is fashionable. That is, fashion leaders observe how others interpret trends through clothing, and, in turn, get ideas for what trends need to be adopted as their own. In the clothing swap environment, participants are essentially shopping from each other’s closets. Thus, central to the swap environment is a focus on the social shopping motivation. Gena describes how swapping is a social process:

G: I felt like it [the clothing swap party] was a great experience to be able to be around a whole bunch of girls that like to talk about clothes. We didn’t just talk about clothes, but you know, we all have that sense that we all do kinda like fashion, and I felt like that was a great experience... So, I felt like it was a slumber party type thing, with the whole type of fashion mixed with it.

Clothing swaps provide a setting for social interaction that is centered around fashion. This interaction resembles the interaction that occurs within a shopping setting (i.e. suggestions about how to wear an item, what looks good, what does not look good, etc.) However, social *swapping* is different in that swap parties usually are held in someone's home rather than a mall, which makes the process more intimate and personal, as Gena alludes to above. In this light, clothing swap parties are similar to the traditional Tupperware party of the mid-20th century, in as much as these parties provided a venue for women to share advice, acquire items, and forge social bonds with one another. In both cases, the social interaction element is at the forefront of the process.

The interpretation also reveals how social interaction is important to acquisition within the online swapping environment. For instance, many websites provide space where members can share pictures of items they have recently acquired through a swap. For Rehash.com, this is displayed in members' "gallery" pages. Members often post pictures of themselves wearing the items, and sometimes mention the other member they swapped with for the item. A great deal of social interaction ensues from these posts. That is, fellow members of Rehash stop by and view the galleries and then post feedback, comments, and questions regarding the items. Members use interaction to encourage one another in their swapping decisions. It also serves as an example for how swappers depend on each other to make their swapping experience, as a whole, an enjoyable one.

It is evident from the interpretation that the social nature of fashion facilitates identification and group membership among fashion leaders. In this study, swappers are seen using their shared interest in fashion as a starting point for building relationships

that, in turn, establish group membership. They use clothing to communicate their distinctiveness within the group and in comparison with other groups. In other words, they engage in fashion as a social experience, and even use the swap environment to this end. Indeed, a clothing swap is less about the clothing than it is about the swap, which is the focus of the next section.

Clothing Swaps as an Emerging Consumption Experience

An increasingly popular means of clothing acquisition and disposal, clothing exchange has become more prevalent in the last few years. However, as discussed in Chapter II, very little academic research has been conducted on the topic thus far. As revealed in this dissertation, the swap experience is a fruitful location for understanding how consumers, and, in this case, fashion leaders, use clothing to address issues of fashion consumer group identity and membership. To explore the significance of swapping for understanding consumption relative to fashion leadership and group membership, two areas of discussion are included in the following sections: (a) *Why Swap?* and (b) *Broadening Traditional Consumption Concepts*.

Why Swap?

To date, only one study exists (Albinsson & Perera, 2009) that reports on data collected in the swap context. Thus, there is still a great need to understand consumers' swap motivations and behaviors. This dissertation therefore makes several contributions to the literature, as it reveals several key reasons and goals for swapping. Moreover, because fashion leaders were the focus of the study, the interpretation sheds light on how they use swaps to maintain their own identity and that of the group.

Obviously, for participants, one of the key motivations for attending clothing swap parties is the opportunity to acquire “free” clothes. Because they have a strong interest in fashion, frequently seek information about it, as well as shop for it on a regular basis, being able to obtain new clothes without having to spend money is quite appealing, and particularly for those who are on a budget. Thus, clothing swap parties give fashion leaders another outlet in which to “shop.”

Albinsson and Perera (2009) found similar motivations for swapping among their participants. However, findings of the present study go further by revealing the extent to which the social element of the swap is just as important as the acquisition possibilities. In particular, the fact that the parties and websites permit interaction with other fashion leaders adds to the appeal of swapping. The chance to acquire a trendy item from the closets of fashionable peers is part of this appeal, as Veronica explains,

V: I think it’s cool because you always have that friend where you’re like – Oh, you need to let me hold that item”... or something like that. And, if you’re going to do it with a group of friends, then that item could be there and you can have it... and you’re like, “Thank you!”

Another key motivation that surfaced in this study points to the use of swaps for clothing disposal purposes. That is, participants emphasized the need to clean out their closets to make room for new items. As fashion leaders, they constantly keep up with new trends, and therefore, in order to buy new things, they need to have the space to store them. Relatedly, the clothing swap process prompts them to keep an inventory of what is in their closets, and to decide what merchandise stays and what merchandise goes. Interestingly, this “out with the old, in with the new” mentality was not only motivated

by the desire for the new, but participants talked about how they wanted to give their clothing away via swaps. This desire was driven by the fact that participants' clothes would be "recycled," as the new "user" would extend the life of a garment. As April explains, in a big picture way this allows consumers to be less wasteful, "I think it's good for the clothes. They get more wear out of them instead of just being tossed." This finding supports a similar kind of motivation that surfaced in Albinsson and Perera's study (2009), as the authors found that some consumers participate in exchange out of a desire to enhance the sustainability of clothing.

As pointed out above, a primary benefit of swapping is the socializing that occurs and ultimately the bonds that are created among swappers, whether at parties or through the websites. Indeed, I oftentimes observed participants come to a swap party as strangers and leave as friends. Participants talked about how the social atmosphere of the swapping environment was conducive to making new friends, and the hosts organized the food, drinks, and "ice-breaker" activities for this very reason. In many instances, participants continued to socialize beyond the actual swap event. Surprisingly, this was also the case even in the online swap environment, as sometimes swappers who initially only swapped through the website later formed personal relationships that lead to swapping in person. A posting within the forum area on Rehash.com reflects how this process can evolve:

T: I was just going through my Rehash "address book" thing and Google mapping people out of curiosity, and discovered that two Rehashers lived 41 minutes away from each other! How cool is that!?

S: Very cool, if they have good stuff and are friendly people! Kristin lives very close to me and we have swapped outside of Kroger on several occasions! We would really like to go thrifting together sometime! So, who lives near you?

T: That's so awesome! I wish I could find someone who lived close enough. the closest I've seen was about two hours away. I live in Newport, RI.

Although Albinsson and Perera (2009) found that some of their participants connected post-swap via Facebook, they did not examine the extent of this bonding and its implications for swap behavior. In contrast, findings of the present study illustrate how the bonds formed through the anonymous environment of the swap website can become strong enough for individuals to want to swap with each other in person.

A final motivation for swapping that emerged in this study was that of identification and group membership. In other words, participating in swaps helps fashion leaders keep up with what others are wearing and doing. It also keeps them in line in terms of fashion leadership group expectations. Participants discussed being concerned about maintaining the "right" fashion-oriented image. One of the ways this concern manifested itself with respect to swapping was evidenced by Kayla, who was insecure about her clothing when she was initially invited to a swap:

I: What was your reaction when you heard about this whole swapping thing?

K: I was like crap... I don't have cool clothes!

Kayla knows that she will be in the presence of fashion leaders during the clothing swap party, so she feels she must bring clothes that fit in with the group. If she does not, she

might not be deemed fashionable enough. Hannah also felt a similar kind of apprehension, which led her to choose higher quality clothes to bring to the clothing swap event: "... Intentionally, I chose at least some good quality clothes." Hannah thinks that bringing quality merchandise to the swap allows her to avoid being judged negatively by her peers, which, in turn, protects her status as a fashion leader.

In a similar, but perhaps more positive vein, participants see swaps as a way of maintaining fashion leadership status by sharing ideas and fashion knowledge. That is, swaps are places where fashion information and style ideas are exchanged freely. However, it should be noted that this sharing goes beyond just ideas to impact actual decision-making. For instance, there were several instances wherein a swapper may have been apprehensive about a particular item. Whenever this occurred, other swappers would contribute ideas and information to encourage her to try out the item. In most instances, the feedback received from fellow swappers convinced her to take the item. Although this behavior is similar to reference group influence commonly seen in the shopping context, and reflects the notion of social shopping (Bearden & Etzel, 1982; Simpson, Douglas, & Schimmel, 1998), the present study is the first to reveal its influence in the swap environment.

Broadening Traditional Consumption Concepts

At the same time that this study illustrates how clothing swaps expand our understanding of traditional shopping motivations and behaviors, it also indicates how swaps can broaden the traditional consumption frameworks. Although bartering is an old

phenomenon, the swap is a relatively new way of looking at exchange, and one that can be used to broaden our understanding of the consumption cycle.

Grewal and Levy (2010) view the concept of exchange from the perspective of a simple marketing system that is made up of buyers and sellers. That is, the authors assert that in the exchange medium, a collection of sellers represent the industry while a collection of buyers represent the market (Grewal & Levy, 2010). Within this system, communication between the industry and market occurs, as the industry communicates to the market details of the products that are offered. In the process, the market fulfills the exchange by giving the industry money for the goods they are taking ownership of (Grewal & Levy, 2010). While these authors look at exchange from the perspective of money being traded between the buyers and sellers, exchange can also occur without money.

Lamb, Hair, and McDaniel (2008) define the concept of exchange in marketing as the consumer giving up something to receive something that he or she would rather have. According to the authors, in order for an exchange to be successful, it should meet the following five conditions: (1) there must be at least two parties or individuals, (2) each individual has something that is of interest to other individuals, (3) each individual is capable of communication and delivery, (4) each individual has the right to accept or reject the exchange offer, and (5) each individual finds it desirable to deal with the other individuals in the exchange (Lamb, Hair, & McDaniel, 2008). The interpretation provided by the present study regarding swaps practically mirrors each of these five conditions.

Situating the clothing swap in the context of exchange in this way highlights Lamb et al.'s (2008) conception of value and the four p's (see Figure 31). Swap participants, as fashion leaders, obviously value the fashion-forward styles available through swapping, whether in-person or online (i.e., places) as it affords them access to pieces that can be combined to create an overall style that is unique (i.e., product). By the same token, participants also value the relationships formed with other swappers during the clothing exchange experience, as these relationships prove to be a means for receiving clothing as well as and fashion information (i.e., also a product). Value is delivered within the swapping context as participants acquire this merchandise for "free" (i.e., price). Ultimately, the swapping experience is made more valuable to participants because of the kind of clothing, given the unique merchandise they acquire from swaps, and the fact that it is "free." Last, once participants take part in the swapping experience, value is communicated to others via word of mouth (i.e., promotion). In other words, participants share the items they acquired from their swapping experiences and stories of the swapping process with others. This communication further promotes the value of swapping as a mode of exchange, thereby helping to continue the cycle.

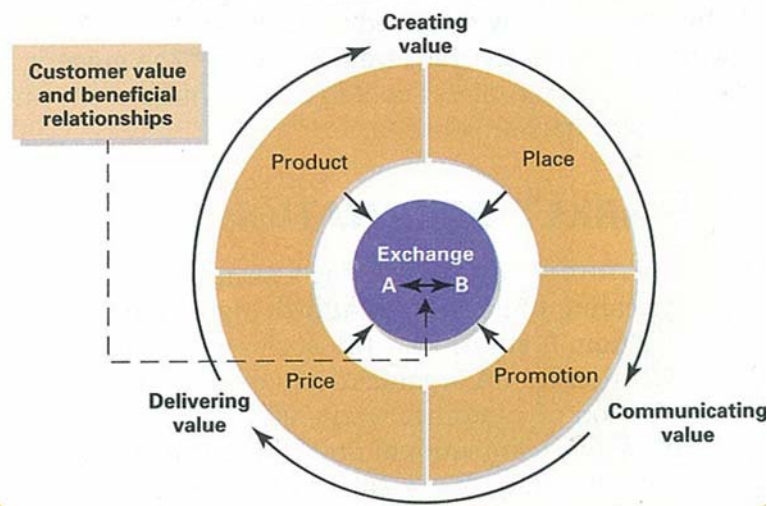


Figure 31. Exchange, Value, and the Four P's

Adapted from: Lamb, C., Hair, J., & McDaniel, C. (2008), *Marketing*. Mason, OH: South-Western Cengage Learning.

As noted in Chapter II, Roux and Korchia (2006) suggest that alternative marketing systems, such as exchange events, have become more prevalent in recent years. As seen in this study, the fundamental marketing components (i.e., the four p's) are carried out through the clothing swap process, as groups of individuals are gathering in a common location to exchange a variety of items without money actually being traded (Albinsson & Perera, 2009). This location can include the Internet, as several types of clothing swap websites now exist (Krugel, 2011; Winter, 2011). Whether the location is real or virtual, swapping serves as a type of consumption that takes into account the fundamental marketing principle of goods used to fulfill basic consumer needs. Much can be learned from how consumers engage in clothing swaps, including why a growing number of consumers have become interested in second-hand merchandise, and are shopping at the increasing number of second-hand stores (Roux & Korchia, 2006).

This study also revealed how the consumption cycle can be viewed differently through the lens of clothing swaps. In the traditional sense of consumption, the process is linear in nature, beginning with acquisition and ending with disposal. The consumer starts a new cycle with the acquisition of the next item. In the case of swaps, the same is true to the extent that each swapper acquires something new-to-her from the swap. However, acquisition and disposal occur at the same time for the swapper. Through exchange, the swapper gives something (disposal) to receive something (acquisition), thereby creating a more circular type of pattern. This pattern is enhanced by the fact that individual consumption cycles overlap within a swap, such that one consumer's disposal is another's acquisition and vice versa. This finding has yet to be discussed in the literature, but is significant in terms of what it means for our understanding of how consumers experience the consumption cycle.

A Matter of Brand

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore how fashion consumer groups, specifically fashion leaders, use clothing to establish and maintain their identity and group membership and the role of brands in this process. Thus, included in this section is a discussion of findings that emerged relative to brands as well as what these findings indicate regarding the conceptual framework of the study.

Perhaps the most surprising finding of the study was the low level of importance participants placed on brands in general. Although brands are important to participants, as fashion leaders, they view brands as more of a tool than an ultimate goal or outcome. That is, brands are relevant if and when they can be used to express one's individuality,

and therefore one's identity as a fashion leader. However, it is important to note that fashion leaders do recognize the value of brands, but because their clothing needs are diverse and they shop from a wide variety of stores to meet these needs they are not necessarily driven by the desire to own brands.

Indeed, participants exhibited somewhat spurious relationships with brands. On the one hand, participants were very aware of apparel brands and oftentimes described a particular aesthetic as connected with a brand. Moreover, at times, brand consciousness appeared to impact decision-making during the swap process, as some participants indicated greater interest in an item if it was of a recognized brand name. On the other hand, it was clear that the overall look of the garment took precedence over any brand name. For instance, while Hannah was interested in several branded items and was disappointed about not acquiring an Isaac Mizrahi dress from the swap, she also indicated that her interest in the brand was not as important as the look of the garment. As she puts it, "...But even if it was [a] good brand – if it doesn't fit me or I didn't like the clothes... I won't choose that dress." Clearly, visual appeal is essential, as participants consider what they could do with the garment (i.e. how they could wear it to communicate their fashion-forward image), as the first priority, and of greater importance than whether it is a brand name. This finding supports that of Goldsmith, Heitmeyer, and Freiden (1991), who posit that consumers are motivated to purchase fashionable clothing based primarily on visual appeal. The notion that visual appeal is a dominant decision-making factor has implications for how retailers position their merchandise, particularly merchandise that is targeted to fashion leaders. That is, retailers should focus on what makes the garment

unique and different beyond the brand itself, as what it looks like is most important. Ultimately, the brand name alone does not always invoke the interest of fashion leaders, and in fact, it appears that brand actually plays an indirect rather than a direct role in the fashion leadership experience. For example, Forever 21 was identified as a retailer brand that was a reliable source for trendy, fashion-forward merchandise. In other words, fashion leaders used Forever 21 as a tool for communicating their fashion leadership. However, as discussed earlier, this does not mean that these fashion leaders will only consider Forever 21 items, in as much as they prefer to shop from a variety of types of stores.

Revisiting the conceptual framework for this study also helps to better understand the nature of the relationship between fashion leaders and apparel brands. As shown in Figure 32, brand, fashion consumer groups, and identification are positioned in the context of the swap environment. Arrows are used to indicate the reflexive relationships between the three concepts. Two questions guide the interpretation of these relationships: (1) *What role does brand play in the fashion consumer group identification?*, and (2) *How do brands facilitate fashion consumer group membership?*

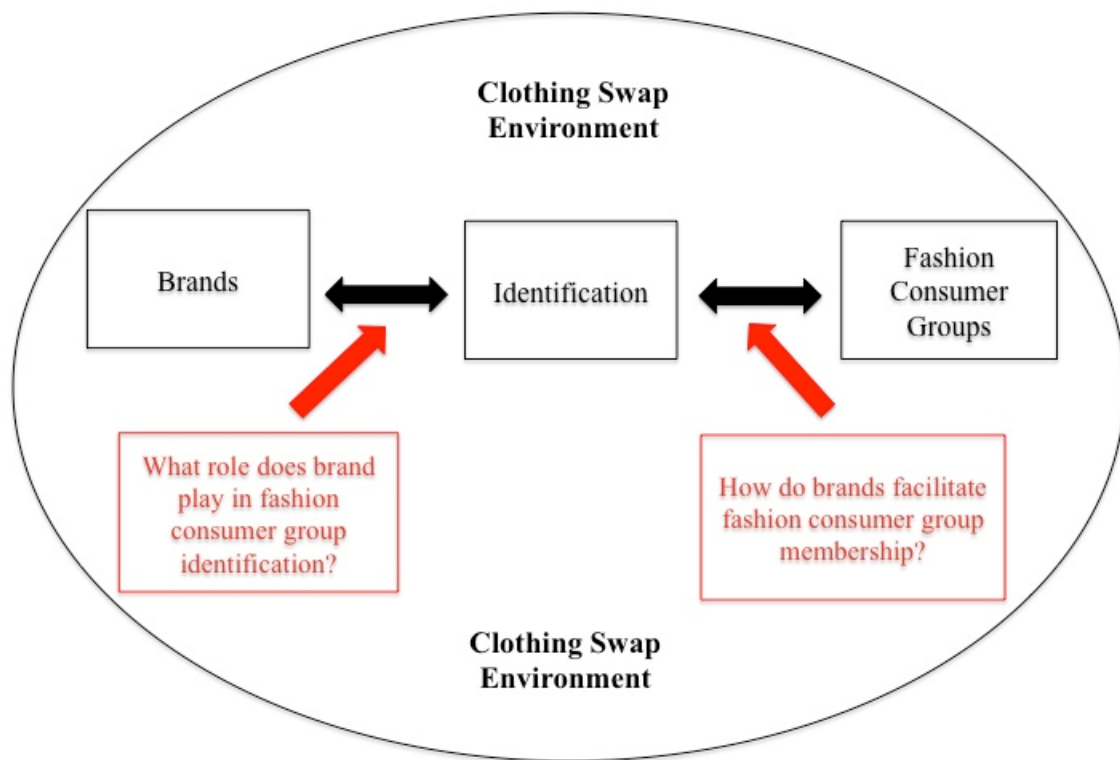


Figure 32. Conceptual Framework

To address the first question, there is evidence from the interpretation that indicates how brands are used by fashion leaders to identify with the group, and conversely, to identify with the brand. Specifically, fast fashion brands provide a range of choices for style creation, as well as offer the latest in new trends. Fashion leaders, as a group, value both of these things as they help them to be identified as fashion leaders by other fashion leaders as well as non-leaders. In this study, participants identified Forever 21 as being one of those brands, and discussed how the brand's trend-driven options help

them express their fashion-forward personas, thereby assisting them in communicating their fashion leadership to others.

Regarding the second question, as to how brands facilitate group membership, the literature suggests that groups use brands as a means of exhibiting distinctiveness (Kuenzel & Halliday, 2010). This distinctiveness can apply to members of the group as individuals, as in the case of fashion leaders, and to the group as a whole (fashion leaders vs. fashion followers). However, the data suggest that the brand itself does not facilitate the membership *per se*. Instead, members use brands as part of their overall fashion repertoire. Further, as a group, fashion leaders differentiate themselves from other groups through their fashion skills and knowledge rather than through brands. While they rely on certain brands to help them maintain their skills and their group membership, they do not attribute their distinctive looks to any one brand. Ultimately, this study indicates that while fashion leaders are brand aware, and identify with certain brands, as a group they are not necessarily brand loyal (Aaker, 1991).

Summary

In this chapter, I discussed the broader issues that emerged from the interpretation presented in the previous three chapters. I began with a discussion of what it means to be a fashion leader, and how fashion is more than just clothing for them as it is a lifestyle. The importance of understanding fashion as a social experience was also discussed. I then examined the phenomenon of the clothing swap party and discussed how the swapping environment provides a means for social interaction and helps to broaden

traditional consumption frameworks. Last, I examined the role of brand within the fashion leadership experience and clothing swap context. In the next chapter, I reflect on the study's findings and provide suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER VIII

REFLECTION AND IMPLICATIONS

The goal of this study was to explore how fashion leaders use clothing to define identity and group membership, and the role of brands within this process. In this dissertation, I sought to understand what it is like to be a fashion leader through the fashion-related behaviors shared among members of this group. In particular, I explored the ways that participants express fashion leadership identity, and how they use clothing swaps to this end. As a result, this dissertation addresses a two-fold gap that exists in the literature as it examines fashion consumer group identification and sheds light on the clothing swap phenomenon. Through participants' involvement in the clothing swap experience – both in-person and online – the ways by which they communicate fashion leadership and group membership were identified. Participants' responses highlighted how fashion leadership is established and maintained not only through an enduring interest in fashion, but through social interaction with others who share this interest. As this study found, the shared experience of fashion leadership was facilitated by swaps, which have become new social locations for forging group membership. In this chapter, I reflect on the process used to achieve the study's objectives, as well as consider the implications of the study's main findings for further research on the topic of brands, fashion consumer group membership, and clothing exchange.

This chapter is comprised of two parts: (1) *Reflecting on the Process* and (2) *Implications of the Outcomes*. In the first part, I reflect on the research goals and objectives relative to the process of data collection and interpretation. In the second part, I articulate the main findings that emerged through the interpretation, and provide some practical recommendations based on the findings. I conclude with a discussion of how the limitations of the study point to possibilities for further research.

Reflecting on the Process

In this study, I employed an interpretive ethnographic methodology to investigate fashion leadership and group membership. The ethnographic approach allowed for these concepts to be examined within a fashion-oriented context: the clothing swap. To understand the clothing swap, I collected data from live, in-person swaps as well as from swap websites. For the in-person swaps, I first recruited party hosts, who then invited guests for the event. Before each swap party, I conducted an in-depth interview with the host that included a review of her closet to better understand her fashion-related behaviors. In addition, before the guests arrived, I observed how she prepared the swap environment, as the preparation shed light on the atmosphere that she sought to create. During each clothing swap party, I observed the interactions between swappers as well as noted their preferences for specific types or brands of clothing. After the swap party, I conducted in-depth interviews with a minimum of two swap party guests. Interviews focused on their fashion-related behaviors and their goals relative to the swap.

As indicated in Chapter III, the participants in this study, while mostly students, were particularly diverse in terms of their ethnicity and age. This diversity proved to be

beneficial not only to the process of collecting data, but also to the resulting interpretation. Given the diversity of the clothing swap party hosts and their guests, every swap experience was unique. While there were common rules and practices that every host implemented, how they executed the party and created an atmosphere of interaction differed. As the researcher, this variety allowed me to discover new things with each swap event as it occurred. The mixture of backgrounds of participants was also beneficial to the understanding of fashion leadership that emerged, in as much as it represents diverse perspectives.

Given this study's ethnographic research design, I sought to immerse myself in each swap event, and brought clothing and accessories to exchange with others. This allowed me to experience the swap first hand and as an insider. This inside perspective was particularly important as I experienced being a part of the clothing swap culture along with other guests. As I engaged in the clothing swap process, I experienced the same emotions, hesitations, and curiosities as my participants.

Yet, being both researcher and swapper also presented some challenges. For example, party guests quickly forgot they were participating in a research study as I socialized and exchanged clothing with them. However, by the same token, I would sometimes forget my role as researcher, becoming so engulfed in the process. In such cases, I had to monitor the kinds of interactions I entered into with participants. Thus, I sought a balance of "give and take" through interactions with participants during the swap party. For instance, during one swap party, participants began engaging in personal discussions regarding dating experiences. As not to hinder my role as the researcher, I

shared very general information on this topic, but was careful not to share information that was too detailed or personal.

In addition to the interviews and observation of in-person swaps, I immersed myself in online swap culture as much as possible. Specifically, I became a member of five clothing swap websites and, using the netnographic approach (Kozinets, 2010), I observed interactions between members on these sites. In particular, I sought out discussions regarding apparel, styles, trends, and brand preferences. While a great deal of information was collected from these websites, it was a challenge for me to remain an observer at all times. Indeed, more depth could be achieved by conducting participant observation; however, that was not the goal of the present study's research design.

Overall, blending data collected from in-person and online swapping environments helped to address the objectives of the research, as one type of data served to supplement the other. Moreover, the ethnographic/netnographic approach proved to be the most appropriate method for understanding the clothing swap phenomenon, seeing that research on this increasingly popular practice is almost non-existent. Through in-person and online swap investigation, I exposed myself to the breadth of current consumer swap behaviors, venues, and formats.

During the interpretation of the data, I sought to explore the experiences of participants as a foundation for understanding the fashion leadership experience. Each participant, while unique, is also a part of a larger whole – a group defined by an interest in fashion. Thus, interpreting participants' experiences as a group sheds light on what it means to be a fashion leader and how fashion leaders identify with each other as part of a

group. Commonalities among the participants that surfaced were thus used to identify emergent themes. Through interpretation, I explored how fashion leaders use apparel to establish group identity and membership, and through the clothing swap environment, sought to understand the process they go through in making apparel decisions. As a result of the interpretation, three conceptual areas were defined and emergent issues and themes were used to structure each area. Shaped by the experiences of participants, each conceptual area explores what the data mean for the purpose and objectives of the study. To ensure that I articulated participants' experiences as "correctly" as possible, I relied on the process of participant confirmation (Nelson, LaBat, & Williams, 2002). That is, I selected several participants with whom I shared an outline of the thematic interpretation, as well as representative quotes. I received positive feedback from the participants, who confirmed that my interpretation was on track.

Based on the thematic interpretation of data, I then considered the findings of the study relative to the pertinent literature and the conceptual framework guiding the study. This allowed me to articulate the broader significance of the study's findings for the overall knowledge that exists (or does not exist) with respect to the core concepts of the study. In light of the relatively few qualitative studies on fashion leadership, as well as the paucity of research on clothing swap behavior, this study provides a much needed foundation that addresses some major gaps in the literature.

Implications of the Outcomes

For the participants of this study, fashion is a fundamental means of self-expression, particularly for communicating individuality and uniqueness. As fashion

leaders, apparel is their primary mode of expression and they deliberately seek to use it to display their personalities. Participants' talked about how their clothing defines who they are, as it helps them to be distinctive. Indeed, for most participants, exerting individuality through clothing was so important that they developed specific shopping behaviors – such as shopping at certain kinds of stores so as to mitigate the risk of running into “copy-cats.”

Participants also shop at a wide variety of stores out of a need to maintain distinctiveness (including at boutique, thrift, and fast-fashion venues). They take one-of-a-kind items and put them together with mass-produced fast fashion to create their own style. To do this successfully, however, each must have an in-depth knowledge of trends and fashion. As fashion leaders, participants talked about acquiring knowledge from multiple resources, such as magazines, blogs, and other media. They not only use these resources to stay up to date, but they also use them to create unique styles and therefore to develop and maintain their fashion skills. These skills define them as fashion leaders and help to set them apart as a group.

Examining participants' experiences within the clothing exchange framework illustrated the social nature of fashion and fashion leadership. Although participants exhibited a blend of hedonic and utilitarian shopping motivations, their swapping motivations were mostly social in nature and this appeared to be the case both in-person and online. The social interactions that took place in the swap environment facilitated decision-making, as styling tips, suggestions, and stories were shared. Swappers seem to

welcome the exchange of information as much as the exchange of clothing, as it helped to reinforce group membership.

One of the more interesting findings of this study is the extent to which being a fashion leader actually means being a part of a group. Fashion leaders engage in specific fashion-related behaviors and these behaviors serve to reinforce their membership in the fashion leadership group. Yet at the same time, this group membership is founded on the shared need for uniqueness and the desire to express one's individuality through dress. However, there did not appear to be any tension resulting from this individual-group dynamic. Instead, it points to the highly social nature of fashion and fashion consumption.

This social component emerged in several different ways throughout the interpretation. For example, given participants' reliance on one another as barometers for what is fashionable, they often end up adopting each other's styles. Moreover, they also view each other as trusted fashion advisors, and keep each other "in check" in terms of fashion choices. Such interactions were frequently seen within both online and in-person swap contexts, as swaps serve as sites for sharing styles as well as style information. Swaps are the perfect consumption environment for fashion leaders, in that the purpose of the swap party or swap website is to bring them together as a group around a shared love of fashion.

In this sense, the social nature of the swap strengthens group membership among fashion leaders, and this extends to the online swap environment as well. Both have established rules of engagement adhered to by swappers and offer means for socialization

into the swap culture via the swap host or website administrators. Swappers are expected to contribute to a successful swap outcome, and, therefore, each swapper must be motivated to give with the understanding that she will also receive. Reciprocation can even be seen to extend to the bonds that are created through swaps, in as much as, through swap-related social interactions participants build relationships, and do so even in the virtual world.

The idea of give and take points to the way that clothing swaps broaden the general concept of exchange, and, in some ways, call conventional notions of the consumption cycle into question. Indeed, a key finding of this study suggests that one end of the cycle (acquisition) can occur alongside the other (disposal), as swappers exchange an old item (disposal) for one that is new to them (acquisition) which is another swapper's old item (disposal) who is swapping for a new one (acquisition) and so on. As swappers must deliberately give in order to receive, the process allows consumers to experience both ends of the cycle simultaneously. It was clear, however, that swappers cannot dispose of just anything, in as much as their credibility as fashion leaders is evaluated by the clothes they bring to swap. Clothing items that were still in style, or of high-quality, were expected. Building on this facet of swaps, retailers might benefit by addressing the disposal component of the consumption cycle. For instance, at certain times of the year, perhaps Christmas, retailers could provide incentives for consumers who bring in their gently used clothing. Retailers could offer discounts on new merchandise, and then consider ways of reusing what is disposed of instead of throwing it away.

Perhaps one of the most surprising findings that emerged from this study was the lack of focus on or commitment to specific brands. Instead, participants reference brands as part of their overall fashion knowledge, and use them in different ways as indication of their fashion skills. This was the case with Forever 21, one retail brand that participants frequently purchase. That is, Forever 21 is known for offering them the fashion-forward items they need to integrate into their unique and distinctive looks. Brand, in this case, is less about signaling socio-economic status (as one assumes most brands are used to do) than it is about opportunities for maintaining fashion leadership. In other words, associations with Forever 21 are about how it might be used as a means to an end, rather than the end itself. To be clear, brands do appear to hold some level of importance among fashion leaders, but they do not rely solely on brand to create and express their identity to others. Instead, they rely on their fashion knowledge and skills to communicate their fashion leadership. Thus, if a brand helps them carry out their fashion leadership, then they will use it as a tool to do so.

Yet, considering what this study found about fashion leaders' associations with Forever 21 and other fast fashion retailers, these retailers could consider creating websites that facilitate greater consumer/retailer interaction to form stronger bonds with this particular consumer. For example, Forever 21 clearly has a following among fashion leaders. The retailer could build on this by highlighting these particular consumers on their website, making a space for sharing style information and ideas much like the swap websites do. The retailer could even enlist fashion leaders, who are already keen on

conducting trend research, as trend-spotters, to post on what is current. Stores could then feature variations on the looks captured by these fashion leaders.

On a related note, because fast fashion seemed to provide the brands that participants most frequently purchased, and because they shop at a variety of store types, including consignment stores, it may be worthwhile for these stores to seek out more products from fast fashion these retailers. For example, Plato's Closet is a popular consignment store that targets fashion-forward consumers with their second-hand offerings through their slogan "Brand Name Gently Used Clothing." Because fashion leaders go through their clothing styles more rapidly than other consumers, they wear them less often and for a shorter period of time. This compressed consumption cycle is conducive to second-hand stores, as the items may not be great quality, but they are not worn by one consumer for very long. Offering more gently used fast fashion brands would help stores like Plato's Closet attract more of their target consumers – fashion leaders.

In this study, my overall goal was to explore how fashion leaders use clothing to define their group membership, and the function of brands within this process. In doing so, I found that being a fashion leader means more than just engaging in specific behaviors, it requires embracing fashion as a lifestyle. Fashion is the means by which this group communicates their individuality to others, and their fashion knowledge and skills set them apart from other groups. Moreover, their deep-seated interest in fashion is the tie that binds them together as a group, in as much as their identities are rooted in fashion. This perspective on fashion leader behavior provides deeper insight into the

topic, as it goes beyond simply identifying characteristics that fashion leaders possess. Further study of fashion consumer groups from a qualitative perspective is needed as it provides greater depth to the breadth of information that exists resulting from the many quantitative studies that have been conducted on the topic. One interesting approach would be to conduct focus groups with fashion leaders – or any fashion consumer group. As this study revealed just how important group membership is, it would make sense to employ the focus group method in future studies. Conversely, quantitative research that builds on the big picture findings presented here would be useful for investigating fashion leadership and fashion consumer behavior more generally. Such inquiry could, for example, examine differences in fashion consumer behavior across cultures, and even the extent to which there may be global fashion consumer groups resulting from emerging global consumer culture. Last, dimensions of meaning within swap context could be explored through such product characteristics as country of origin, fabric, color, and size.

Although this research provides a starting point for understanding how consumers use the Internet to swap clothing, further research is needed on the online swapping community, and in particular, studies that employ a more participant observation kind of netnographic approach. This would mean engaging in online swapping, conversations with users, and responding to posts and forum discussions. Examining the topic in this way would help to shed light on the values, motivations, and behaviors of online swappers and point to how they may differ from in-person swappers.

Future research may also consider other kinds of swap venues, including those of particular reference groups. Moreover, as the present study focused only on small-scale,

in-person swap parties (4 – 5 people), further research could explore consumer behaviors and experiences with respect to large-scale swap parties. As mentioned in Chapter II, public clothing swaps can include upwards of several hundred swappers. Planning, coordinating, and executing such an event is quite different than doing so with a handful of people. The range of garments exchanged would also be much greater, and levels of social interaction less intense, than at smaller scale parties.

In conclusion, explaining fashion consumer group behavior in the swap context provides an in-depth understanding of how fashion leaders use clothing to identify with others and establish group membership. For fashion leaders, fashion is a lifestyle as well as a social experience, and swapping allows them to further their fashion interests and expertise. An emerging type of consumption experience, swaps are not just about exchanging clothing in a fun environment. Swaps help fashion leaders to fulfill their desire for uniqueness, while providing a social space for strengthening ties with others of like style and mind.

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APPENDIX A

IRB CONSENT FORM



THE UNIVERSITY of NORTH CAROLINA
GREENSBORO

OFFICE OF RESEARCH COMPLIANCE
2718 Beverly Cooper Moore and Irene Mitchell Moore
Humanities and Research Administration Bldg.
PO Box 26170
Greensboro, NC 27402-6170
336.256.1482
Web site: www.uncg.edu/orc
Federalwide Assurance (FWA) #216

To: Nancy Hodges
Cons, Apparel, and Ret Stds
213 Stone Building

From: UNCG IRB

Date: 11/03/2011

RE: Notice of IRB Exemption

Exemption Category: 2.Survey, interview, public observation

Study #: 11-0383

Study Title: Investigating the Phenomenon of Clothing Swap Parties

This submission has been reviewed by the above IRB and was determined to be exempt from further review according to the regulatory category cited above under 45 CFR 46.101(b).

Study Description:

The purpose of this study is to examine the clothing exchange process of clothing swap parties. The goal of the research is to describe the experience of female clothing swap party participants - their process for choosing clothing for the swap party, swapping motivation and behaviors during the swapping event and their level of satisfaction after the swapping event.

Investigator's Responsibilities

Please be aware that any changes to your protocol must be reviewed by the IRB prior to being implemented. The IRB will maintain records for this study for three years from the date of the original determination of exempt status.

CC:

Delisia Matthews, Cons, Apparel, And Ret Stds
, (ORC), Non-IRB Review Contact

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO

CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT: LONG FORM

Project Title: Investigating the Phenomenon of Clothing Swap Parties

Project Director: Dr. Nancy Hodges

Participant's Name: _____

What is the study about?

This is a research project. The purpose of this study is to examine activities involved in and motivations for attending clothing swap parties.

Why are you asking me?

I am asking you to participate because as an adult female consumer who has attended clothing swap parties, your perspectives on the clothing swap process will provide unique insight into the topic.

What will you ask me to do if I agree to be in the study?

You will be asked to be interviewed regarding your past experiences participating in clothing swap parties. On agreement to be interviewed, the interview will last approximately 1-2 hours. I will also ask you to be available for a review of your interview transcript once complete. This review will take approximately 1 to 2 hours.

Is there any audio/video recording?

Digital audio recording will be used to ensure reliability of data collected and to capture your perspectives on the clothing swap party process. Because your voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the tape, confidentiality for things you say on the tape cannot be guaranteed, although the researcher will try to limit access to the tape as described below.

What are the dangers to me?

The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants. As stated above, there is a slight risk of a breach of confidentiality. Measures that will be implemented to minimize this risk are described in the confidentiality section below.

If you have any concerns about your rights or how you are being treated, please contact Eric Allen in the Office of Research and Compliance at UNCG at 336-256-1482. Questions, concerns or complaints about this project or benefits or risks associated with being in this study can be answered by Dr. Nancy Hodges, who may be contacted at 336-256-0291 or njnelson@uncg.edu, or Delisia Matthews at 202-236-2882 or drmatth2@uncg.edu.

Are there any benefits to me for taking part in this research study?

There are no direct benefits to participants of this study.

Are there any benefits to society as a result of me taking part in this research?

Your participation may help to shed light on what a clothing swap party participant goes through during the process of exchanging clothing and what motivates participants to choose to exchange certain clothing items as a means to acquire new clothing.

UNCG IRB
Approved Consent Form

Valid 11/3/11 to 11/2/12

Will I get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything?

There are no costs to you or payments made for participating in this study.

How will you keep my information confidential?

Consent forms will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the Principal Investigator's campus office, audio files will be password protected, and participants will not be identified by name when data are disseminated. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. Consent forms will be kept for three years after the close of the study and destroyed by shredding. Audio files will be kept password protected on the student researcher's home computer for a minimum of five to a maximum of seven years upon completion of the study, after which point the files will be erased. There will be a file linking participants' identities to pseudonyms that will be used in published materials. This file will be kept separate from the data and will be erased no more than seven years after the close of the study.

What if I want to leave the study?

You have the right to refuse to participate or to withdraw at any time, without penalty. If you do withdraw, it will not affect you in any way. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data which has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identifiable state.

What about new information/changes in the study?

If significant new information relating to the study becomes available which may relate to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you.

Voluntary Consent by Participant:

By signing this consent form you are agreeing that you read, or it has been read to you, and you fully understand the contents of this document and are openly willing consent to take part in this study. All of your questions concerning this study have been answered. By signing this form, you are agreeing that you are 18 years of age or older and are agreeing to participate, or have the individual specified above as a participant participate, in this study described to you by Delisia Matthews.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

UNCG IRB
Approved Consent Form
Valid 11/3/11 to 11/2/14

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Host Interview (Pre-Party):

1. Describe the last clothing swap party event you attended. How did you find out about the clothing swap party? Who was the host of the party? What was your relationship, if any, to the clothing swap party host or individuals who attended?
2. How many people attended the clothing swap party?
3. About how many clothing items did each individual bring to the clothing swap party?
4. Did any other activities take place during the clothing swap party (i.e. music, pampering, etc.)?
5. What peaked your interest in attending a clothing swap party?
6. What did you like and/or dislike about the clothing swap party event?
7. Give me a tour of your closet.
8. Do you enjoy shopping for clothing in general? Why?
9. Where do you typically buy your clothing items? Why?
10. If you could shop anywhere for clothing items, where would you go? Why?
11. Are there any specific brands of clothing you typically purchase?
12. Point out some favorite items within your closet, and tell me what makes them your favorite.
13. What are some things in your closet that you think “fit” with who you are as an individual?
What makes them “fit” so well with you?
14. What items have you chosen to exchange during the clothing swap party? Why have you chosen these items?

Hypothetical Questions:

15. What would you do with the clothes you have chosen to swap if clothing swap events did not exist?
16. What would shopping for clothing be like for you if apparel brands did not exist?
17. What do you anticipate your experience being like hosting this upcoming clothing swap party?

Devil's Advocate Questions:

18. Why do you think others might find clothing swap events as not appealing?
19. Are clothing swap party versus traditional shopping environments really that different from each other? How so? How not?

Ideal Position Question:

20. Describe an ideal apparel shopping experience.
21. Describe an ideal clothing swapping experience.

Interpretive Questions:

22. Tell me more about what type of clothing swap party host you will be. What type of characteristics will you exhibit to create an open clothing exchange environment?

Participant Interview (Post-Party):

1. Describe your likes/dislikes of your clothing exchange experience.
2. What types of clothing were you especially interested in? What sparked your interest in these items?
3. How did you decide what items to bring with you to exchange at the clothing exchange party?
4. How important are brands to you in the clothing exchange environment?
5. Do you assign a higher value to certain apparel brands versus others?
6. Are there particular brands that you typically purchase? What makes you purchase these brands more frequently?
7. How would you describe your overall style? Do you think style played a part in the clothing exchange event?
8. Would you attend a clothing exchange event again in the future? Why or why not?

Hypothetical Questions:

9. If you were to attend a clothing swap party in the future, would you suggest that they do anything differently?
10. If you had to describe a clothing exchange event to someone who has never attended, how would you describe it? How would you describe the environment? How would you describe the culture?
11. If you hadn't attended the recent clothing swap party event, what would you have missed out on, if anything?

Devil's Advocate Questions:

12. Why do you think others might find clothing swap events as not appealing?
13. Are clothing swap party versus traditional shopping environments really that different from each other? How so? How not?

Ideal Position Question:

14. Describe an ideal apparel shopping experience.
15. Describe an ideal clothing swapping experience.

Interpretive Questions:

16. Tell me more about what it was like to take part in a clothing swap event for the very first time? What was your initial feeling?
17. Explain more about your specific process for choosing clothes to bring to the event? Did you consult with others?